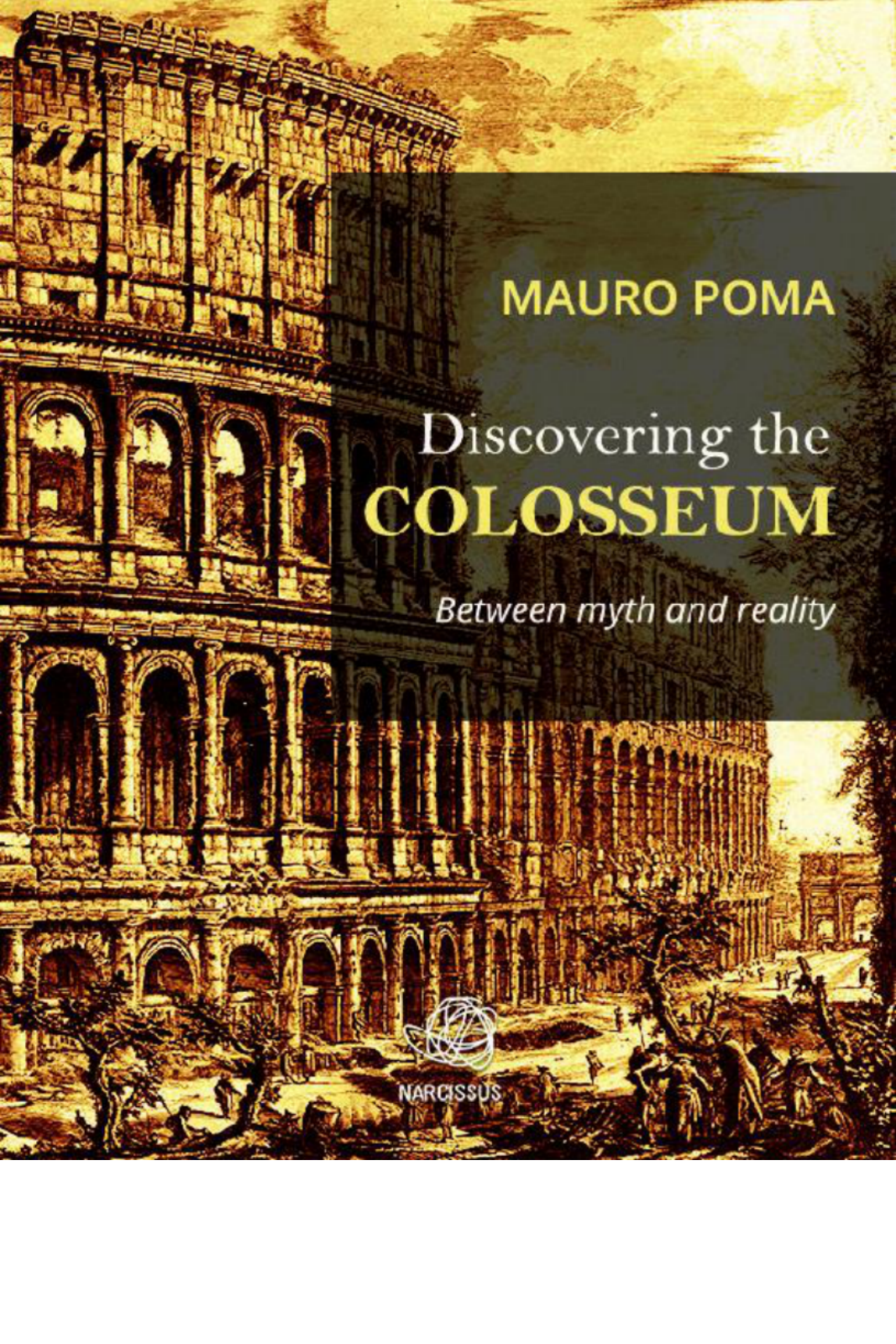


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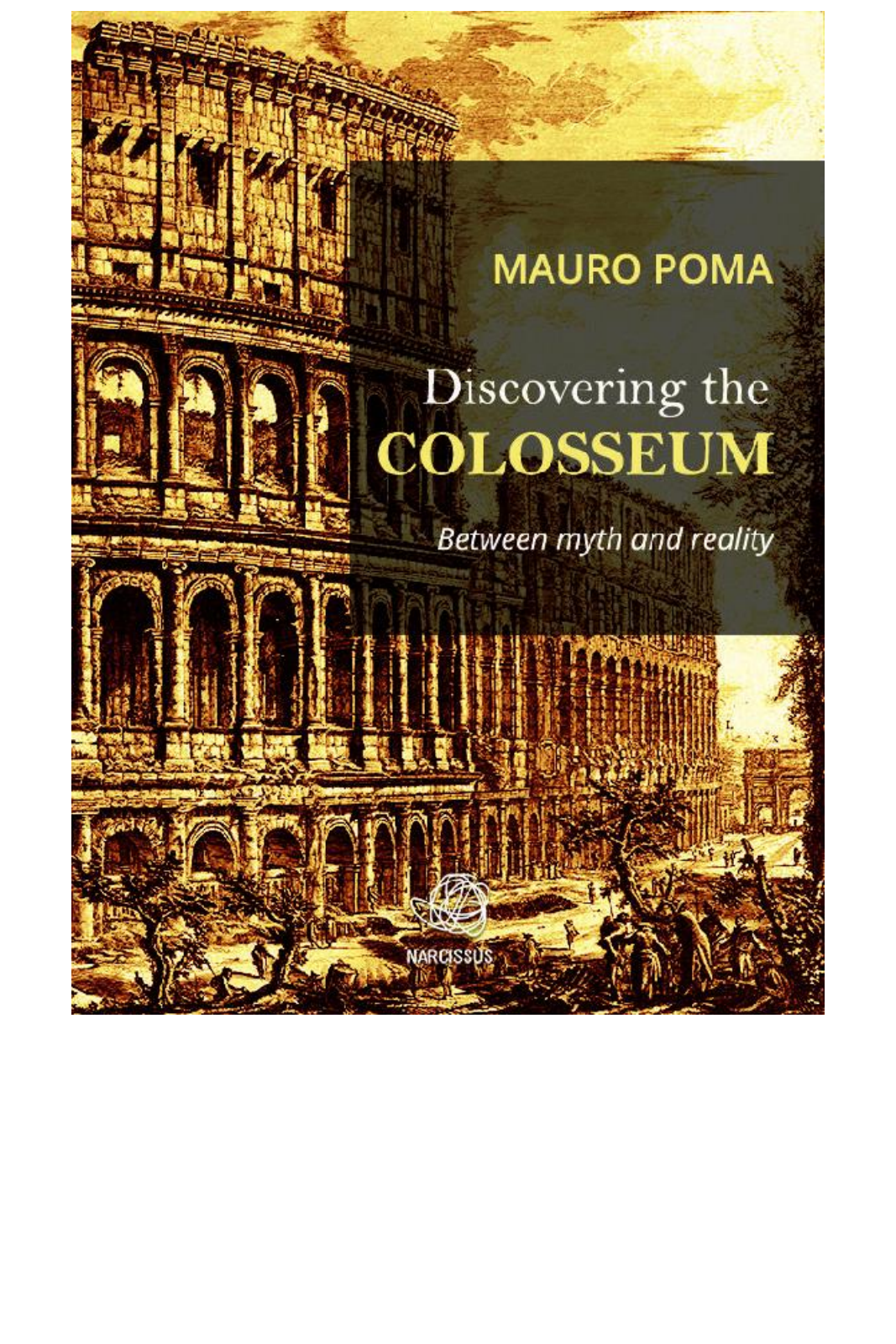
MAURO POMA

Discovering the
COLOSSEUM

Between myth and reality



NARCISSUS



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To Flavio

Introduction

My decision to write this book is linked to my passion for Rome, its history, its monuments, and glorious past. Strolling around this wonderful city, I have often imagined being transported back to the ancient past and being catapulted, even if just for one day, into what was the biggest city of antiquity. The impulse that finally pushed me to write this book was my activity as a licensed tour guide of Rome and all the questions I have been asked by tourists from all over the world as I walked them through the ancient walls of the Colosseum. I accompanied many people inside this ancient monument, which sparks the most imagination and curiosity of the modern visitor. The questions were many and diverse. I wanted to gather them together here in this book as if we were on one of my guided tours. I want to address this piece of writing to all those who want to know more about the Colosseum, but do not want to buy lengthy and detailed essays, manuals of architecture, or heavy history books. My intention is to focus on those aspects of the history, stories, games, and organization of the Colosseum that are normally overlooked or described in so much depth that the visitor is lost in the details. This book is primarily a look at the curiosities of this huge monument of the Romans, without (of course) omitting all of the historical, architectural, and practical aspects. I tried to focus my research on those aspects that still intrigue the visitor and, at the same time, shed light on many facets of Roman society, which is so distant from us and yet still so close. I will try to give voice to those ruins that have remained for centuries and try to make them actively talk to those who want to hear some of the stories they can tell. Indeed, each and every stone, corner, column, and arch can recount many stories, if correctly interpreted. Enjoy reading this book with its virtual tour of the Colosseum!

Rome, June 2015.

1. The Colosseum

Statistics of the Colosseum

Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.

(A. Einstein)

The Colosseum as we see it today is just a third of the original structure; the remaining two-thirds have disappeared throughout the centuries. It took only eight years for the ancient Romans to build such a magnificent monument by exploiting thousands of slaves brought to Rome by Vespasian and his son Titus after war campaigns in Palestine that were fought only a couple of years before construction of the Colosseum (72 A.D.) began. The height of the outer ring of this magnificent monument is approximately 50 meters (164 ft) and the foundations are 12 meters (39 ft) deep. There were 80 arches in the outer ring over 3 levels. At ground level, 76 of these arches were used as entrances. In particular, one was only for the emperor, one for the senators, and another two for the gladiators: the first, called *Porta Triumphalis* (Triumphal Gate) to enter the Colosseum alive; the second, the *Porta Libitinaria*, to exit the Colosseum dead. In total, there were 240 arches and almost certainly those of the first and second stories were decorated with statues. The Romans used 100,000 tonnes (220,462,280 lb!) of travertine and 300 tonnes (661,386 lb) of iron to make grips to secure the blocks. A special road was constructed to transport all of this travertine. It connected the quarries near Tivoli (still active today) with the site where the Colosseum was being built. The arena has an elliptical shape with two imaginary axes of 188 and 156 meters (616 and 511 ft, respectively), which form a perimeter of 527 meters (1,729 ft). The arena, which was 80 by 55 meters (262 by 180 ft) covering a total area larger than 3,600 square meters (38,750 square ft), was separated from the first row of seats by a 4 meter (13 ft) high wall. Inside the Colosseum, there were approximately 100 fountains for public use. The Romans could control a huge awning called the *velarium* (the same system as that used in modern stadiums) on top of the Colosseum in response to the weather. The *velarium* was held together by 240 posts. Inside the Colosseum there were five levels of bleachers that had a slope of 37.5 degrees, which allowed an optimal view from any position. The Colosseum could realistically accommodate between 55,000 and 60,000 people,

similar to a modern soccer stadium. Perhaps surprisingly, the Romans also thought about evacuation routes as well! All of the exits, called *vomitoria*, could evacuate everyone in only 8 to 10 minutes in case of an emergency... a record! The Colosseum was used until 523 A.D., when the last show was reported. Emperor Titus declared 100 days of consecutive festivities for its inauguration in 80 A.D. During this time, there was a show every single day and 9,000 animals died. Trajan, some 30 years later, returning from his war campaigns in Dacia (modern Romania), exceeded those numbers with 120 days of shows and the death of 11,000 animals. Today, on average, the Colosseum is visited every year by more than 5.6 million people.

Once upon a time, there was a lake

[1]

Are you sure Nero was so crazy? Maybe it was better to burn it!

(A. Sordi – Italian actor 1920–2003)

July 19th, 64 A.D.: a hot day in Rome, from all perspectives! On that day, the largest fire in the history of Rome broke out: it began in the area of the Circus Maximus and spread rapidly throughout almost the entire city. About two-thirds of Rome were destroyed by that devastating and relentless fire. For nine days, the city was in the grip of flames and when the fire was finally extinguished it left piles and piles of rubble, as well as homeless, desperate people and many bodies. However, this was not the only fire in the history of Rome. Through the centuries, the city was devastated multiple times by flames. Why was Rome burning so frequently? Mainly because wood was still abundantly used. We should not imagine Rome as just the beautiful city shown in the movies, where magnificent temples alternate with idyllic squares paved with superb marble. Rome also included poor neighborhoods with *insulae* (condos of the time) that had balconies, posts, beams, and windows all made of wood. In the *insulae* (and not only there), people cooked with braziers and the risk of starting a fire was always very high. Wood was widely used in all buildings and fire, which was not only used for cooking, but also to heat spaces and illuminate streets and squares, was a constant threat. Augustus, the first Roman emperor, almost 60 years before the great fire of 64 A.D. [2], decided to actively fight this danger by instituting the so-called *vigiles*. These people had the double duty of patrolling the streets to prevent any situation of potential danger (as our policemen do today) and extinguishing any fire that should develop

(exactly like our fire service). Today, in modern Italian, the word *vigili* indicates both the city policemen (*vigili urbani*) and fire service (*vigili del fuoco*). At that time, the firefighters used buckets, brooms, crampons, axes, ropes, ladders, wet blankets, and types of hydrants with leather piping. This equipment, although less technologically advanced, is not that different from what is used today after all. Nevertheless, despite the creation of this institution (7,000 firefighters strategically located throughout Rome), fire was still a big threat. A particularly severe fire occurred on July 19th, 64 A.D. At that time, the emperor was Nero (whose name comes from a Sabine word that means brave and strong). He was a quirky character depicted for centuries as a monster. With a squat appearance, of medium height, with a reddish beard and light-brown hair[3], Nero was fond of painting, sculpture, and above all music and singing. Even today, when you think about Nero and the fire of Rome in 64 A.D., the first image that comes to mind is one passed down the generations: Nero playing the fiddle and enjoying the show of a burning city from the top of a tower. Was it really Nero who burned Rome? Is it true that the emperor contemplated the fire while singing and playing? Although this image is still very vivid in people's minds, it seems that it never happened. When he heard about the fire, Nero returned immediately from his seaside villa at *Antium* (now called Anzio, south of Rome) to arrange and personally direct help. It seems that he even seized large quantities of food destined for patricians and distributed them to those who were left with nothing and that he opened his gardens to provide shelter and aid for the homeless. Then, when the flames finally subsided, leaving only a sense of death and destruction, Nero decided to implement an innovative plan: fireproof materials for houses, wider roads as well as more porches, and more outlets for water. By exploiting a brilliant idea, he filled the marshes of Ostia with rubble to contribute to its detoxification. However, despite all of these preventative measures, he was not able to disprove rumors that he himself had set the city on fire. He then decided to blame it on the Christians, and was responsible for the first persecution against them and centuries of negative judgments on his own character. Even if he was not responsible for starting it, Nero managed to benefit greatly from the fire: he built his pharaonic *Domus Aurea* in one of the areas most affected. Located between the Palatine, the Oppian, and the Caelian hills, this immense property even included an artificial lake. A few years later, Flavius Vespasian built the Colosseum on the site where this lake was located. At the entrance of such a luxurious

residence, Nero not just wrote his name, but commissioned a giant 35 meter high (114 ft) bronze statue of himself in the guise of the god of the Sun, Apollo. Such a large statue (the largest ever built in the antiquity, using the Colossus of Rhodes as a model) was to be called *Colossus Neronis*. Its name is probably the reason why, in the Middle Ages, the Flavian amphitheater, built in proximity to this statue, was renamed the Colosseum[4]. In the area of the *Domus Aurea*, there were halls for parties, gardens, bathrooms, gyms, groves, a zoo, nymphs, pretend caves, waterfalls, and painted porches. Salt water and sulfur springs were used in the bathrooms. The main building was constituted of many rooms decorated in gold (hence the name *Domus Aurea*—Golden House), stucco ceilings decorated with semiprecious stones, frescoes, and mosaics. Nero was the first to position mosaics on vaulted ceilings and not on the floors, which was traditional until that time. This was a new approach and had a huge influence on Christian art: mosaics started to be part of the decorations of Christian churches, as we can still see nowadays in Rome and elsewhere. The decorations were made of countless rooms frescoed by Fabullus, the court painter of Nero, whose touch was quick and certain. Fabullus was a curious character, who took his duty so seriously that he worked wearing a *toga* (the official elegant mantel that identified Roman citizens), even on scaffolding, and only for a few hours a day when the light was suitable. While creating his extraordinary pieces of art, he could not imagine that his frescoes were doomed to secular fame: in the 15th century, a young Roman fell into a crack in the ground on the Oppian hill and suddenly found himself in a completely frescoed place that resembled a magic cave. Rumors spread very quickly and all artists working in Rome wanted to see with their own eyes such special decorations. The thoughtless aerial frescoes of Fabullus, with colored shapes, frames, hybrid beings, chimeras, imaginative weaves, and fantastic animals were inspiration for some of the most important artists of the Renaissance, such as Raphael, Pinturicchio, and Filippino Lippi. Since they were found in rooms that looked like "grottoes", they were named "grotesque".

Nowadays, the rediscovered *Domus Aurea* on the Oppian hill includes about 300 rooms; all designed for entertainment and parties. There was no kitchen or no latrine, but only a succession of endless, richly, and lavishly decorated rooms, such as a beautiful octagonal courtyard facing two of the main dining rooms. The courtyard was topped by a dome, whose ceiling could be revolved (thanks to an ingenious mechanism operated by slaves) to resemble the skies of

ancient astronomy. Moreover, as if by magic, people attending the banquet could enjoy splashes of perfume mixed with rose petals. The complexity was such that, when the works were completed, Nero exclaimed, "Finally, a home worthy of a man!" The architects *Severus* and *Celerus*, designers of the *Domus Aurea*, were able to build a masterpiece that the capricious emperor did not enjoy for long. Shortly after the *Domus Aurea* was completed, Nero, deposed by the Senate and with no more authority, committed suicide. Before dying, he uttered the famous phrase: "It is an artist who dies with me!"

After his death, even the memory of Nero was banished and his splendid residence was partly buried and used as a foundation for the overlying Baths of Titus first and later for the Baths of Trajan. For Rome, a new political regime began: a new dynasty of rulers settled in the city soon after the turbulent period between 68 and 69 A.D., during which time three different emperors ruled for short periods. The new dynasty was one of the Flavians, whose progenitor was Flavian Vespasian. A valiant general, engaged for a couple of years in taming the rebellion in Judea, he could be considered a "tough man" [5]. He was still in Judea when he received news that he had been proclaimed emperor by the troops. As a consequence, he left the Jewish war in the hands of his son Titus, and went to Rome, where he was elected emperor after defeating Vitellius.[6] Vespasian was not only the first of a new dynasty of rulers, but he also tried to make up for all of the atrocities committed by Nero by giving back to the Romans what had been taken from them. In other words, the area of the *Domus Aurea* was opened again to the public and the splendid works of art amassed by Nero were returned to the Romans and exhibited in the Forum of Peace[7]. Later, his son Titus built his spa by using the facilities described as foundations on top of the portion buried in the Oppian hill. In his propaganda program to make the people feel close to the institutions, Vespasian decided to exploit the original area where the lake of the *Domus Aurea* was to construct the biggest amphitheater in Rome and in the entire empire. It may sound strange, but until that time Rome had never had a real amphitheater and the gladiators mostly performed in the Roman Forum. Gladiatorial games were loved by the Romans and, by offering them such a grand amphitheater, Vespasian hoped to mend the relationship between the emperor and the Romans; thus putting an end to the period of instability that followed the controversial reign of Nero. Also, the location of this amphitheater was strategic: a valley between four hills[8], close to the very center of the city (the Forum), with enough

room to accommodate thousands of people who wanted to attend the shows. Moreover, by using the lake bed as a foundation there was no need for extra excavation works. What did Vespasian really do to begin the construction of the amphitheater? He drained the lake through drainage channels, waterproofed the structures, and isolated them completely from the water; a gigantic task. Once drainage of the water was completed, the workers began to lay the foundations. Works began in 72 A.D. and continued for 8 years, and in 80 A.D. emperor Titus inaugurated the Colosseum. How many people worked on its construction? We do not know the exact number, but we can roughly estimate that many thousands of slaves and private citizens took part. Thousands (perhaps ten thousand) of Jews were brought to Rome as war prisoners after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. by the son of Vespasian, Titus, and were certainly used as workers.

The construction enterprise

Nihil difficile volenti (nothing is difficult for those who want to).

(Anonymous)

Vespasian was loved first as a brave general and later as a great emperor. During his life, his parsimony was proverbial (or well known) and the measures he took to restore the state patrimony did nothing but fuel rumors that he was terribly stingy. The answer he gave to those who criticized him for the creation of a tax on public urinals (still called *vespasians* in Italian!) is still famous: Vespasian, after throwing down some coins, invited those who had criticized his tax to smell them and said: "*Pecunia non olet!*". Money has no smell, regardless of where it comes from. However, his detractors thought that it was indecent to profit from a human need. Considering his thrift and the fact that state patrimony at the time of Nero was significantly depleted, where did he find the necessary funds for the construction of the Colosseum? From the recently ended Jewish war. Nero's foreign policy was peaceful, so he had not embarked on any significant military adventures. On the contrary, when he began construction of the Colosseum, Vespasian had just successfully tamed a rebellion that yielded a huge booty for Rome. Many of the funds used for the construction of the Colosseum came from the spoils of that war. To ensure that the foundations were solid enough to support the extraordinary weight of the amphitheater, thousands of tons of earth were excavated from the old lake. The foundations below the pillars and the structures of the steps are approximately eight to

twelve meters (26 to 39 ft) deep, whereas they are four meters deep (13 ft) under the area of the arena. The substructures that we see today (the understage of the Colosseum) did not yet exist and were built a few years later by the second son of Vespasian, Domitian. One curiosity of the foundations: today only less than half of the external facade of the Colosseum still stands, the northern side, whereas the southern side no longer exists (it collapsed long ago after several earthquakes). Why was the southern side most affected by the collapse, whereas the north side remains? Did Roman engineers perhaps make mistakes in their project or miscalculations? No, not at all. One reason to explain why the collapses following the earthquakes were concentrated on the southern side is that the foundations of the southern side of the Colosseum are on the bed of a small river that once flowed in that area and joined the Tiber. As a consequence, in this area, the foundations are somehow less stable. On the contrary, the foundations of the north side rest on robust tuffaceous soil that, over the centuries, was much more resistant to earthquakes. Another explanation is that the north side was left intact as a memorable "background" of the procession. This side faced directly into what was called *Via Papalis*, which was the path connecting St. Peter to St. John in the Lateran. Here, the pope used to walk to take possession of the Basilica of St. John in the Lateran.

Coming back to construction, once the foundations were laid, the actual construction of the amphitheater began. Several sites were engaged simultaneously. Each of them dealt with the implementation of different areas, which were supposed to come together once the work was completed. Thanks to giant winches and scaffolding, the skeleton of the structure covered with tuff blocks was realized. The walls were eventually built, and on top of them the vaults that had to support the *cavea* (bleachers), the upper corridors, and the steps were set. The outer facade of the building was constructed from large blocks of travertine stones held together by iron clamps. All of the "holes" (Fig. 1) we see today in the Colosseum (which make it seem like giant Swiss cheese!) are a consequence of the fact that over the centuries the iron clamps holding together the blocks were plundered. Travertine is the most striking building material when visiting the Colosseum. It was chosen not only because the quarries were in Tivoli, close to Rome, but also because this stone was cheap and exceptionally resistant to wear and tear, as well as also being relatively easy to work with. To move all of the necessary travertine for the Colosseum to the construction site, the Romans built a special

road between *Tibur*^[9] (ancient name of Tivoli) and Rome. During the years when the Colosseum was being built, this road was extremely busy and full of carts that carried the blocks to the construction site. It has been calculated that the carts delivered blocks to the construction site every two minutes for six years! Romans also loved carrying out their achievements based not only on speed of execution, but also on quality. For this reason, the blocks in the pipeline were already squared and ready to be deployed without the need for further handling at the construction site. At the same time, other blocks were processed for the realization of the large number of statues placed on the second and third levels of arches. Spreading the management of the works of the Colosseum over different locations greatly contributed to expedition of completion of the works. Another "trick" used by the efficient Romans was to reuse all waste material recovered from work on the lower floors, and also from pre-existing buildings, within the walls of the higher ellipse. Inside these walls, archeologists found material that probably belonged to a series of buildings that once stood where the Colosseum is today.

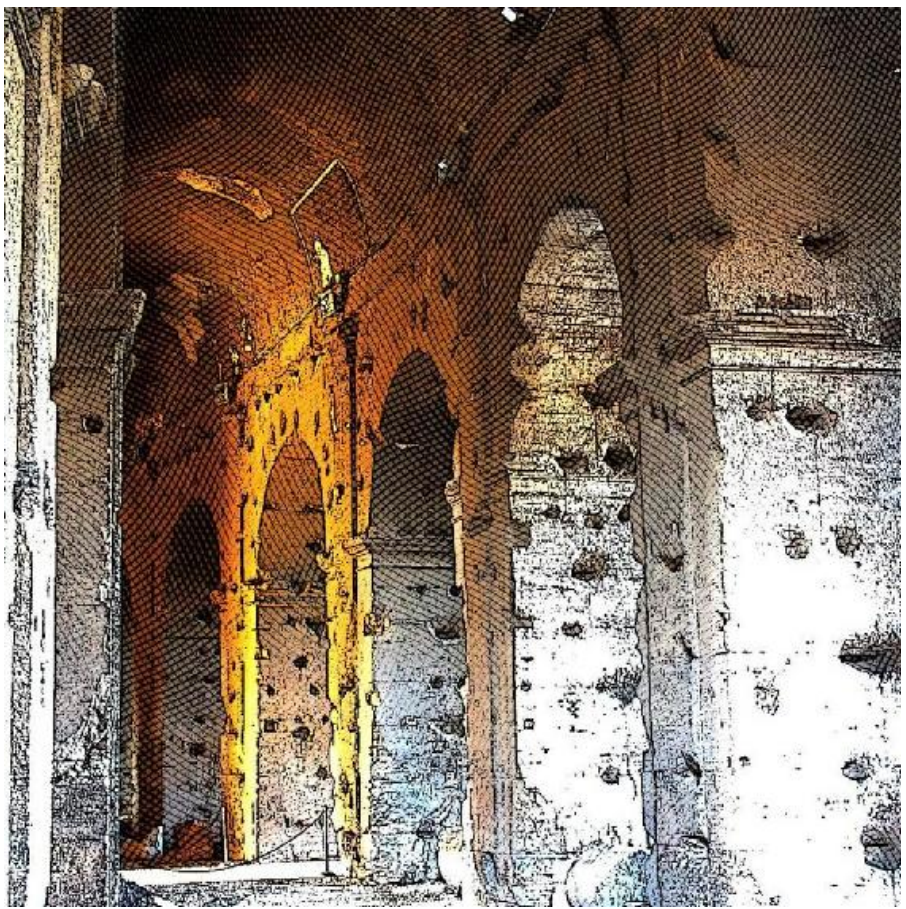


Fig. 1. Some of the holes left by centuries of depredation.

The Romans applied many engineering and technical solutions during the construction of the Colosseum. What is its main secret? Why is it so impressive? The "secret" of the Colosseum, its grandeur, or perhaps, more technically, the key to understanding its architecture, is the arch. There are arches everywhere and, even though most of them have disappeared over the centuries, the architectural element that most distinguishes this monument today is still the arch. Although the Greeks knew about the arch, they never applied it as consistently as the Romans in their architectural achievements [10]. The arch, "inherited" by the Romans from the Etruscans, is a relatively simple, but very solid and elegant, structure. The keystone [11] at the center of the arch is placed in such a way that the weight of the wedges [12] rests on the pillars. Observing the external facade of the Colosseum (Fig. 2), we can easily see how the pillars of the arches of the second and third floors are always built upon the pillars below and never at the center of the arches. In this

way, the structure maintained its strength, which permitted the Romans to increase its height up to almost fifty meters (164 ft, including the fourth floor where there are no arches). Moreover, by repeating series of arches hundreds of times, the Romans were able not only to build a monument of exceptional size, but they could also entrust their implementation to unskilled labor, once again saving considerable time and costs. Who was the architect (or architects) of the Colosseum? We know the names of famous architects of antiquity who linked their names to masterpieces such as the aforementioned *Domus Aurea* designed by *Severus* and *Celerus*; *Rabirius*, who built the imperial palace on the Palatine for Domitian; or *Apollodorus* from Damascus^[13], who was the real genius behind (among other things) the splendid Forum of Trajan, but unfortunately we do not know the name (or names) of those who designed the Colosseum.

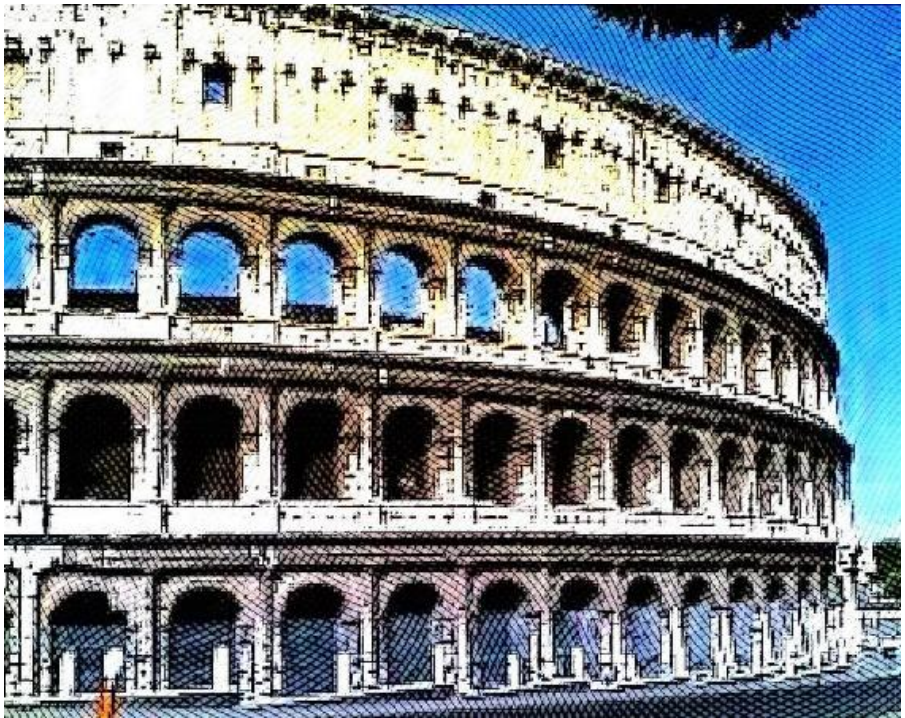


Fig. 2. The external facade of the Colosseum.

A general overview

You'll never see anything greater than Rome.

(Horace)

Picture yourself in ancient Rome. You need to ask someone to show you the way to the Colosseum. That Roman, although probably eager

to help, would not understand your request for the simple reason that in those days the Colosseum was called the Flavian amphitheater. The name Colosseum, as noted above, dates back to a time after its construction. Flavian was the name of the family emperor Vespasian belonged to. Although it is a word of Greek origin, the Romans used the word amphitheater for the first time in imperial times to indicate structures where you could see (Théatron) a show at 360 degrees (Amphi). Roman amphitheaters have elliptical shapes for precise reasons. The most important one is because they wanted to make sure that a substantial number of people could enjoy the shows taking place in the arena from an equally good position. The elliptical shape from this point of view is perfect. When compared with a possible circular amphitheater, it not only allows a larger number of people to be accommodated, but also provides more room for processions, marches, and parades. In an ellipse (like in a circle), there are no blind spots that can block, hide, or limit the movement of actors performing on the stage. A great flaw of Roman amphitheaters was the acoustics: these were definitely bad. However, Roman engineers were never particularly worried about this aspect, since amphitheaters were places where people went to *watch* and not to *listen*[\[14\]](#).

The Flavian amphitheater has two imaginary axes of 188 and 156 meters (616 and 511 ft). Externally, it is surrounded by a ring or a facade composed of four floors with a total height of approximately 50 meters (164 ft). The first three floors are divided by eighty arches each (a total of 240) framed by Tuscan, Ionic, and Corinthian half-columns. The top floor is solid masonry and is punctuated by windows and Corinthian pilasters. In ancient times, these were interspersed with beautiful bronze medallions. All around the amphitheater, there was an area of decking paved in travertine and with a surface larger than 17 meters (55 ft). In this area, there were big stones at regular intervals, but today only five of them remain (*Fig. 3*).



Fig. 3. The five big stones outside the Colosseum.

For a long time, it was thought that these stones were used to hold the ropes used for the velarium, which was the huge awning placed above the Colosseum to protect spectators during performances from torrid sun or bad weather. A much more convincing hypothesis argues instead that they were nothing more than turnstiles. These had the function of regulating and neatly channeling the multitude of people who entered the Colosseum and were, in effect, ancestors to the turnstiles of modern stadiums. This hypothesis is based on the fact that these stones are fixed in the ground without real foundations. In this way, they could not support the enormous weight of the ropes of the velarium. Moreover, the number of poles (240) placed on top of the attic to support the ropes of the velarium was much higher than the number of stones on ground level (calculated to be 160). What would then support the tension of the remaining missing eighty ropes? Moreover, similar stones were not found in Pompeii, where the local amphitheater, older than the Colosseum, had a velarium as well. If such stones were there, they would have almost certainly been

preserved under the ashes of Vesuvius. The velarium was maneuvered by professional sailors of the imperial fleet of Miseno. They were selected not only because strength and expertise was required, but also because they had in-depth knowledge of winds and other atmospheric phenomena. Rolling out such a huge cover as the velarium was not an easy task. The ropes were supported at the top of the attic by 240 wooden beams. When you enter the Colosseum, you can still see many holes if you look up (Fig. 4). That is exactly where the wooden beams were placed.



Fig. 4. The holes used to hold the wooden beams.

The arches of the ground floor were used as entrances for the public and were numbered (Fig. 5). Even today, on 29 of these arches, the numbers are still clearly visible. These were needed to ensure that people were entering through the arch indicated on their ticket (*tessera*). Once inside people walked through a kind of circular corridor that ended under the bleachers. From here, they could reach their assigned seats by stairs and passages (*vomitoria*). There were probably also signs and directions to help people to find their own place faster. Recently[15], during cleaning works of the facade of the Colosseum, it was discovered that the numbers on the external arches were painted in red for increased visibility at a distance. All but four of the arches of the ground floor were numbered. These corresponded

to the major and minor axes of the amphitheater. Statues were placed under the arches of the second and third floors, but were lost during the centuries and today we do not know who they represented[16]. The arena where the performances took place was at the very center of the Colosseum: here shows, hunting games, death sentences, and fights between gladiators took place. The arena was formed by a wooden plank covered with sand. The word *arena* in Latin indicated the sand that was spread on the ground of the central part of the Colosseum and all other Roman amphitheaters. Why did Romans use sand? Because sand ensured greater adherence to the ground. When the gladiators fought for their life they could not do it on a slippery surface; sand gave better grip and they fell less easily. Another equally practical reason is linked to the enormous amounts of blood shed in the Colosseum. Animals were killed, people were sentenced to death, and gladiators were wounded or died. With every show plenty of blood was spilled and sand could absorb it. Imagine having to clean up gallons of blood from a beautiful marble floor... how long would it take you? At the end of each fight, attendants removed dirty sand and replaced it with more without wasting any time on cleaning. Arena, the name of a typical element of Roman amphitheaters, over time came to indicate the whole amphitheater itself[17]. All around the arena there was a four meter high (13 ft) wall. This had the function of protecting spectators in the front rows, notably senators and the emperor, from wild animals used during the performances. However, such a wall is not an insurmountable obstacle for a persistent feline. As a consequence, ivory rolls were placed on top, so that that jumping over to the other side was basically impossible. Moreover, as a further preventive measure, there were also solid nets.



Fig. 5. One of the numbered entrances.

How many sectors of steps were there in total and how was the public divided? There were five sectors of seats and people were rigidly separated according to their social status. Only Roman citizens could enter the Colosseum and entrance was for free. Unlike today, people did not have to pay to for a better seat—these were already assigned according to social status. Seats closer to the arena were for more important people. In the same way, seats farther from the stage were for people who counted less in society. The privilege of sitting just off the arena was granted to senators [18], Vestal Virgins[19], foreign ambassadors, judges, chief priests, members of foreign delegations, and obviously the emperor. Where exactly did the emperor sit? He probably had a box for himself, but we do not know for sure where this was located. For a long time, many scholars argued that it was on the north side, but nowadays many believe that instead it was on the south side. There are two main arguments for this direction. The first is linked with the presence of a cryptoportico on the south side. This was called "passage of Commodus"[20] because this is where emperor Commodus was almost killed during a conspiracy. This richly decorated passage commissioned by Domitian at the end of first century A.D. could very well be a comfortable and elegant entrance to the amphitheater. The second reason could be that the south side was closest to the Palatine, where the emperor lived.

There was no reason why he should go around the Colosseum to take his place when he could comfortably enter from the south side. There are also many scholars who claim that the box could be on one of the short sides, which possibly granted the best view. There is also reason to believe that the emperor could sit wherever he wanted, without necessarily having an assigned seat in the amphitheater.

On top of the sector of seats dedicated to the Romans that "counted", there was the sector of the knights in a gallery that included eight steps. Going further up, there was the largest sector of the Colosseum, which was divided into two parts. Here, the majority of the Romans flocked to see the shows. The last level was separated by a high wall, had wooden bleachers, and was located under a colonnade of over seven meters (22 ft). This was the farthest area away from the arena and was reserved for women, poor people, and slaves. Every sector of seats was divided by annular corridors where the stairs to the bleachers were located. Drinking fountains were spread along the connecting corridors of the ground and first floors. The fountains, which had a sort of large basin in the front, had a double function: they supplied water for those who wanted to drink, but also provided a receptacle for those with weak stomachs. We should not forget that the shows held at the Colosseum were very "cruel" and not everyone was able to withstand the sight of so much blood. Still today, traces of the fountains can be seen here and there (in Fig. 6 you can see traces of the pipes where the water flowed). The Colosseum was also equipped with latrines. Did the Colosseum flood every time it rained? No! Underground there were a number of channels to drain rainwater and channel it into a large external sewer system that ended in the Tiber. Today, when visiting the Flavian amphitheater, we see a complex of corridors (*Fig. 7*) below what was the arena. These corridors, on two levels, represent the largest known amphitheater underground facility. In the past, this was not visible to the public, since it was covered with the wooden flooring and sand. However, during performances, the understage of the Colosseum teemed with life. The corridors sheltered animal cages, gladiators prepared, sceneries for the hunting games or for mythological representations were raised from here onto the stage, and so forth. Thanks to this underground world where animals and gladiators waited their turn, the magic of the games increased. Animals suddenly appeared on the arena from hatches, along with gladiators. Moreover, special effects were also used: sceneries, reconstructions of environments and landscapes, sometimes materialized out of thin air

in a puff of smoke. The understage was a real microcosm where hundreds of slaves worked in subhuman conditions to guarantee that the public did not miss any of the spectacle.



Fig. 6. Traces of a small fountain.

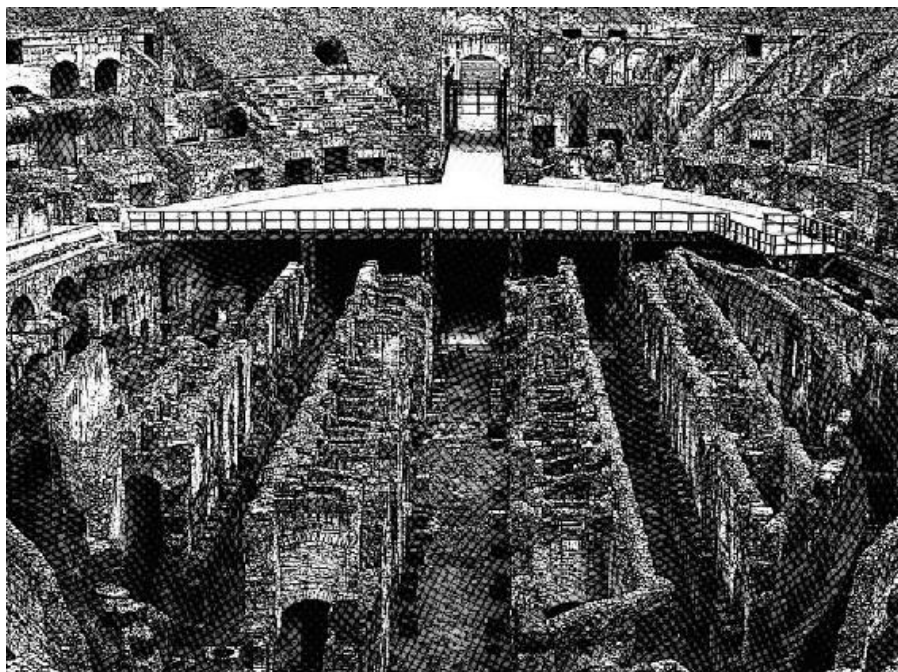


Fig. 7. The understage of the Colosseum.

The hypogeum

He who hasn't seen the nightfall before doesn't swear of advancing in darkness.

(J.R.R. Tolkien)

A visit to the understage is always exciting because you can see virtually unaffected rooms where the sceneries were set up and where gladiators and animals waited their turn to fight for their lives. These substructures were built only approximately ten years after the inauguration of the Colosseum, under the rule of Domitian, Vespasian's son and brother of Titus (under his rule, the Flavian amphitheater was inaugurated in 80 A.D.). Why were the underground structures built in a second movement? Because it was likely that naval battles^[21] were arranged during the first years of the Colosseum. If there were any underground facilities, it would not have been possible to flood the arena and stage the battles. As a consequence, for the first ten years, the underground environment of the Colosseum consisted of a grid of wooden beams upon which the floor of the arena rested. The structure was built this way because it had to be easily removed for the setting of naval battles. Eventually, during the reign of Domitian, everything was built in masonry. After the construction of such masonry, which was functional for the

preparation; staging; and, in practice, success of the shows, no more naval battles were organized. The complex system of corridors, tunnels, and rooms in the underground area included two major corridors that intersected at the center to divide the area into four compartments delimited by walls and passages. On either side of the aisle, there were seven smaller corridors of varying width and length. Because of alterations and renovations made over the centuries, we cannot know with certainty the functions of all spaces. There were almost certainly areas reserved for wild animals. All animals of smaller size and weight (including big cats) were lifted to enter the amphitheater from the eastern gallery. Larger animals, for example, rhinos, elephants, and hippos, came directly from the eastern entrance (the one reserved for the exit of dead gladiators; the aforementioned *Porta Libitinaria*). It was impossible to lift these animals up with an elevator directly from the understage given their weight and size. Probably the wild animals were kept in the basement for one day before the show and were not fed before the performance. Looking carefully, in some places, you can still see traces of the lifts used to raise them to hatches around the arena. The stage sets were not prepared directly in the underground rooms, but in the *summun choragium*, which was a sort of deposit laboratory. Until the time of Hadrian (117–138 A.D.), this was opposite the short side of the Colosseum, where the ruins of the Temple of Venus and Rome are today. Until that time, the stage sets were probably transported through an underground passage[22] and then lifted up to the stage through large openings in the arena. For the preparation of the sceneries, the central corridor was used because it was wider and there was more space to handle the stage sets for lifting. After the age of Hadrian and construction of the Temple of Venus and Rome, the *summun choragium* was moved to where Via Labicana can be found today. However, its function stayed the same. It seems that landscape reconstructions, scenic equipment, and men could emerge into the arena through platforms that were dropped, loaded with what they had to bring up, and then raised thanks to winches operated by slaves (Fig. 8).

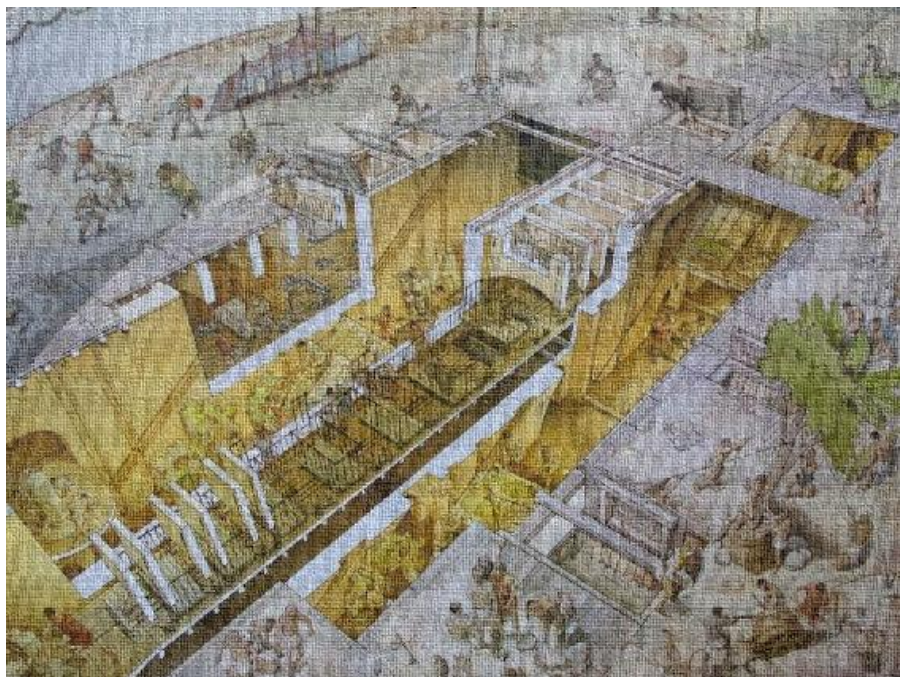


Fig. 8. Reconstruction of activities taking place in the understage area.

This was an ingenious system that always surprised the demanding Roman audience. The staff working in the basement were mainly slaves, who had the arduous task of maneuvering winches and all technical equipment with only the sheer force of their arms. Specialized staff were always ready to direct the work of the slaves based on the necessities of the ongoing games.

How many people worked in the basement? It is estimated that a few hundred people were working in the underground rooms (Fig. 9) during the shows. Imagine the excitement, screaming, sweat, rush, and fatigue of these people. Working in the understage of the Colosseum was hell for various reasons. First of all, there were no windows. There was no air circulation and the air was spoiled by odors from the animals and toil of slaves. Light was also completely absent, since there were no openings from the outside. Torches and oil lamps were used; thus further consuming oxygen and making the air even heavier with stifling heat. Moreover, working in the vicinity of hungry and probably nervous wild animals could not have been pleasant. Add to this the incredible noise from the audience above, the atmosphere must have been deafening. Furthermore, the wooden plank almost certainly allowed some sand to fall through and end up in the basement to make the working conditions even more difficult.

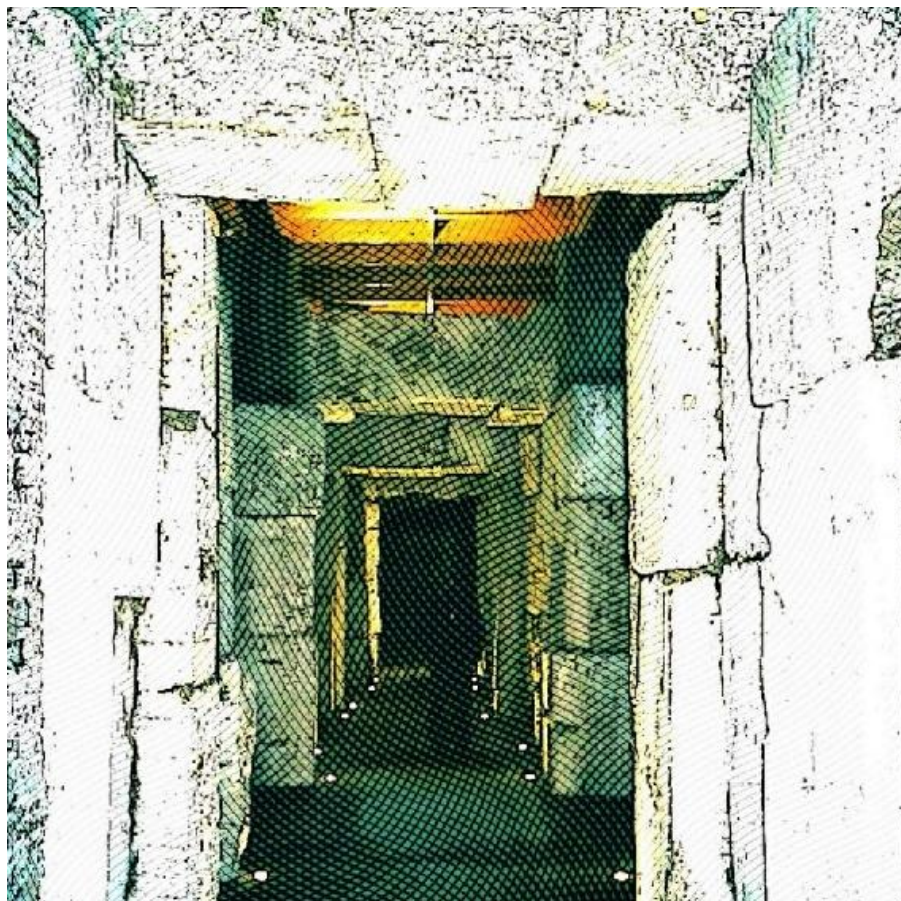


Fig. 9. One of the corridors of the hypogeum.

Nowadays, when you visit the substructures, some very interesting details can be observed. If you look carefully, the travertine of this area is much whiter than that on the ground floor or higher in the Colosseum. This is not only because the underground sites have been less exposed to pollution, but also because for centuries the understage was buried under tons of mud, dirt, and debris. Even before the latest shows were held in the Colosseum (the very last one is dated to 523 A.D.), the underground rooms were probably buried and unusable because of a malfunction of the water evacuation system. It was only at the end of the 1800s and especially in the 1930s that this part of the amphitheater was systematically excavated and brought to light. This is why the original color of the travertine was maintained. A further comparison between the travertine in the basement and the rest of the Colosseum will highlight that the blocks in the underground rooms are not quite finished, whereas in the rest of the amphitheater everything looks more polished. The reason for

this difference is that, since the understage was not visible to the audience, but only to the people working there, there was no reason to finish or decorate the blocks. All other parts were seen by thousands of spectators and had to "appear" at their best. At the beginning of a visit to the basement, when you are in front of the extension of the central corridor, you will see a closed door behind you. That door now closes an underground passage that connected the hypogeum of the Colosseum with what was called the *ludus magnus*, which was the main gladiatorial barracks in Rome and of the empire. The ruins of part of this structure are still visible at the beginning of Via di San Giovanni in Laterano. In the barracks, gladiators were trained, ate, slept, and prepared to fight in the Colosseum. When the gladiators living here had to perform in the arena, they entered this passage by a door that is today closed, crossed the entire underground central corridor, walked up to the entrance reserved for them at the gate *Porta Triumphalis*, and began the parade and procession that preceded the games. Why was this underground passage built? Would not it have been easier to let the gladiators walk from outside? No, and there was a good reason. The Romans were very shocked by the rebellion of *Spartacus*, which took place in 73 B.C. In a very short time, he went from being a simple gladiator to the leader of thousands of rebels who wanted to oppose the regime of Rome. It was the lack of adequate supervision of gladiators that gave opportunities for *Spartacus* to exploit his military training and innate qualities of courage and become a real danger to Rome. After this experience, the Romans made the safety measures around gladiators much more rigid. One of these measures was to channel them, when entering the Colosseum, through an underground passage from which they could not escape and from which it would not have been possible to start any rebellion.

The diverse audience

Luigino sees the Colosseum for the first time and tells his dad: "If the fans

left the stadium in these conditions, who knows what they have done to the referee!"

(Anonymous)

The games were an opportunity for fun and entertainment, but also an occasion when the different layers of varied Roman society, that is, the people, powers, and institutions, could meet. Ordinary people

could see their representatives, like the senators and even the emperor. In turn, he could come into direct contact with his people and be cheered, applauded, respected, and thanked for the games offered. As mentioned previously, admission to the amphitheater was free and seats were occupied based on strict social division. However, as far as we know, at the beginning of the history of ancient Rome, senators and ordinary citizens could watch shows together without any particular division. Officially, until the end of the first century B.C., there was no clear rule for the allocation of seats in the amphitheaters; this was enshrined only after the escalation of social differences. Augustus was the first to issue a clear law on the subject. Between 17 and 20 B.C., he approved the *Lex Iulia Theatralis*; thus controlling, for the first time, the allocation of seats in the amphitheaters. The opportunity to issue this law was given by a scandal that erupted in Pozzuoli (where there was a more ancient amphitheater than the Colosseum), whereby during a show that had attracted a large crowd no one had the decency to stand up and give his seat to an important senator. Annoyed by this lack of respect, Augustus decided to implement the aforementioned law and established that the best seats always had to be reserved for the senators. Other categories of people had their own separate seats, while women no longer had the right to attend the shows together with men. The rules set by Augustus were valid throughout the empire.

Shows and games were strictly reserved for Roman citizens. The tickets were not for sale, but magistrates, religious congregations, institutions, brotherhoods, associations, companies, corporations, unions, and so forth had their assigned seats in the amphitheater as they had a specific role within Roman society. Those belonging to one of the above categories could enter without problem. Those who did not belong had to ask for an invitation from someone higher up in the rank. This custom was followed for a long time and it was only in the fourth century A.D. that seats became officially allocated for particular groups of people, like the senators. Archeologists found several fragments of marble seats bearing the inscription of the class for whom they were intended. On many of them, the names of families and senators can be read. Thus, it was possible to conclude that neighboring families sat close to each other, thereby demonstrating their cohesion and influence/importance in front of all spectators. When the seats were assigned to a different family or person, the inscription was erased, and the new name engraved on the stone.

Inside the Colosseum, the paths to seats were made in such a way that senators and common people could never meet. There was, from this point of view, a real physical separation not present for other social classes that indeed could "meet". The spectators also had to dress appropriately. Only those who had the right to it could wear the *toga*[23]; the cloth that *par excellence* identified Roman citizens. Alcohol was not allowed and there were many criticisms of the emperor Commodus who followed the games while drinking. Many spectators brought pillows from home to watch the shows in a more comfortable way and not on the hard stone or wooden seats reserved for them. The senators, and probably also the knights, who occupied a social status closer to that of the senators, sat on mobile seats, whereas all others sat on fixed benches coated with bricks, marble, or wood at the top level. Apart from the first rows, the space assigned to each spectator could not have been particularly wide, as well as the distance between one row of seats and another. Ancient Romans were on average slimmer and shorter[24] than us, but we can imagine with reasonable certainty that the people were literally pressed against each other while watching the shows. In case of particularly sultry days, seating at the front row was not very profitable either. When the sun was at its zenith, the *velarium* spread over the heads of the audience could not shade all areas and the seats left out were those of the most prestigious spectators. As a consequence, sitting so close to the arena also had its disadvantages. Vestal Virgins also sat in the first rows, together with the senators and other categories previously mentioned. Who were the Vestal Virgins? They were priestesses consecrated to the goddess Vesta, who had to keep the fire inside the temple of Vesta in the Roman Forum alive. That fire had a particular symbolic value for Rome because it represented the life and strength of the city, and as such always had to remain burning. The Vestal Virgins were also in charge of preparing the ingredients for public or private sacrifices. One of these, a kind of sauce called *mola salsa*, made with spelt, was sprinkled on the victim's body. Scholars think that the word *immolate* derives from this particular "sauce". There were 6 Vestal Virgins on duty for 30 years chosen when they were still very young (between 6 and 10-years-old) among the patrician families. Thirty years of their lives were dedicated to Vesta: during the first ten years they were considered novices, during the second ten they devoted themselves to worship, and the last decade was spent instructing novices. They lived in the *Atrium Vestae* (which can still be seen), inside the Roman Forum next to the temple of Vesta. This was a

kind of monastery where they spent their lives independently and were paid by the state. Becoming a Vestal was considered to be a great honor: they were the only Roman women who could make a testament, they were free from their father's rule at the time of entry into the College, they were among the few people who could use a cart to go around the city (others were forced to walk), and judges gave them priority and lowered the consular beams at their passage as a sign of respect. Furthermore, if by chance, one of them met somebody condemned to death, he could ask for mercy and have his life saved. In return for all of these privileges, they were required to fuel the fire of Vesta and remain virgins throughout the period of 30 years. A Vestal who allowed the fire to burn out or had a sexual relationship during the 30 years of service was sentenced to death. It was an atrocious death: since Vestals were priestesses sacred to Vesta who could not be touched (even to be killed), they were buried alive. The ritual consisted of flogging the Vestal and then, dressed in funeral clothes, transporting her to a place in Rome called *Campus Sceleratus* (Damned Field) for this reason on the Quirinal hill. There she was locked in a small room with a bed, a piece of bread, water, oil, and milk. The tomb was closed and the memory of the Vestal (who died of starvation) was soon forgotten.

Returning to the audience of the Colosseum, the quality of the performances offered in the Colosseum was always high, mainly because the public were very demanding. Always eager for novelty and spectacle, the Romans did not willingly accept games of little value or low profile. Since the Colosseum was one of the places visited by the emperors (who financed the games most of the time), it goes without saying that the shows had to be exceptional. The audience at the Colosseum was extremely noisy. It is not clear whether the ancient Romans showed their consent or approval by clapping as we do today; some believe they indeed applauded, whereas others argue that they waved handkerchiefs. In any case, it is certain that the audience would have screamed loudly, made gestures, and had no inclination to observe the rules we now commonly call fair play. Even in those days, there were supporters who supported gladiators on the basis of their armament. The passion and cheering sometimes resulted in violence, just as happens today at soccer matches. It is likely that violence never reached the same levels as those observed at chariot races in the Circus Maximus, but it is reasonable to assume that some violent episodes occurred. A memorable example of this is described to have happened in the amphitheater of Pompeii in 59 A.D. Fans from

Pompeii and Nocera, on the basis of ancient grudges, started to fight inside and outside the amphitheater, leaving many dead and wounded. The decision of the authorities was to close (the "disqualification"!) the amphitheater for ten years.



Fig. 10. Overview of the Colosseum from the inside.

In the Colosseum, if we "peeked" between the bleachers (*Fig. 10*), we would only see men. All women, with the exception of the Vestal Virgins, were relegated to the top level. Even the wives and daughters of senators, despite their social position, had to watch the games from the "pigeon" seats at the top. The only small privilege that recognized their high social status, was the right to sit in the lower wooden bleachers to maintain the same social division respected elsewhere inside the Colosseum. Why was there this difference in treatment between the Vestals and the wives and daughters of the senators? This difference can be explained in one simple way: many women were extremely attracted to the gladiators, they admired their physical strength and courage. Important women^[25] could not resist the temptation to flirt with gladiators. If a Vestal Virgin entertained a sexual relationship, she would have been sentenced to death, whereas wives and daughters of senators would not. As a consequence, the

Romans could reasonably trust only the Vestal Virgins. Relegating the other women at the top level was a way to be certain that no flirting attempts were possible. This, of course, was also a way to protect the good name of the person they were married to or daughters of.

How time was spent on the bleachers

You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.

(Plato)

The program of the games in the Colosseum included a series of shows and performances that lasted several hours. They began with a presentation of all the “stars” of the day. The morning program then continued with fights between animals, followed by circus performances, and ended with hunting games. Around noon, during the lunch break, death sentences or public executions of criminals were staged. Public executions had a dual purpose: to warn the people of the consequences of breaking strict Roman law and to “fill” the lunch break by exploiting these men as human merchandise to be sacrificed for the pleasure of the spectators. The afternoon would continue with the long-awaited confrontations between gladiators. As you can imagine, people could easily spend an entire day at the Colosseum and, as a consequence, between the shows there were breaks to prepare the arena or games, remove corpses, and so on. During these moments, and even during more boring performances, how was the audience entertained? A number of activities were organized for this purpose. Thanks to archaeological findings in the Colosseum, we have a pretty good idea of how people were spending their time. The main activity was play: Romans liked games very similar to ours (backgammon in particular). They played directly on the steps of the amphitheater, where gaming tables or chessboards (*tabulae lusoriae*) were engraved. The checkers were made of a variety of materials: animal bones, glass paste, clay pebbles, and so on. The games were not always “innocent,” but also involved gambling, for example, playing with dice. Games of chance were strictly regulated: they were permitted exclusively during the holiday of *Saturnalia* celebrated from December 17th to 23rd in honor of the god Saturn. During this celebration, it was customary to abolish social separation, exchange gifts, and overlook laws and regulations. During this week, the established order was subverted and aspects of social life that were normally very important for the Romans were forgotten. For

example, slaves could be served by their masters, who in turn became slaves. Gifts were exchanged to please the infernal deities. It was believed that during winter, when the land was uncultivated and could not produce anything due to the bad weather, these deities wandered the earth. The offer and exchange of gifts permitted admittance to the afterlife, and promoted the growth of crops later in the year. The practice of exchanging gifts was taken over by Christianity. On the birthday of Jesus, Christmas, people still exchange gifts with loved ones. During *Saturnalia*, a few other norms and rules were also suspended, including those on gambling: this is probably why we still play bingo and card games in Italy during the Christmas season[26].

As mentioned above, in Roman times gambling was forbidden throughout the rest of the year. Nevertheless, spectators gambled during breaks in the performances at the Colosseum because they knew police checks could not take place given the enormous number of people. Of course, there were con artists and cardsharps who were always ready to take advantage of this in the confusion and crowds. Their presence in the Colosseum was confirmed by findings in the amphitheater of Pompeii. There, among other things, archaeologists found loaded dice and figurative evidence of quarrels and fights that broke out because of gambling. From ancient literature and figurative sources, we know that passion for the games was common to all, everyday people as well as the emperor, men and women alike. However, on the bleachers people not just gambled. During the lunch break, those who did not want to leave the Colosseum could eat at their seats. Many brought food from home and it seems that many also grilled their own meal on the spot using small barbecues. Roman women also could get a manicure or refresh their look by embellishing their hair with pins or slides. Other women did not waste time and sewed dresses, blankets, or other pieces of clothing. During archeological excavations, drawings of gladiators fighting each other or fights between animals and hunters were found to be engraved on the stones. This proves that in those boring moments some audience members also took the opportunity to carve fight sequences of their heroes (Fig. 11) into the stone. A dull moment for some viewers has become an exceptional testimony of what life was like so many centuries ago.



Fig. 11. A fight engraved on a stone.

The surroundings of the Colosseum

*Nothing is impossible for he who is prepared to overcome any adversity.
The fearful ones are the losers.*

(S.J. Hale)

The realization of games with such a high level of organization and preparation presupposed the existence of many other buildings close to the Colosseum. We know the names of these buildings and their

exact location, though for some only approximately, from ancient literary sources as well as from the *Forma Urbis*[27]. The only building pertaining to organization of the games in the Colosseum of which some remains are preserved is the aforementioned *ludus magnus*[28] (Fig. 12); the gym of the gladiators. Upon leaving the Colosseum from the east side, on the other side of the street, one can see many ruins below street level at the beginning of Via di San Giovanni in Laterano. These are now the only visible structures of the *ludus magnus*. In this place, there was a miniature amphitheater that could accommodate approximately 3000 people and was where the gladiators carried out hard training before actually competing in the nearby Colosseum. The two structures were connected by an underground passage traversed by gladiators when they were to perform in the Flavian amphitheater. The remains standing today are only part of the whole complex because a large part lies underneath the buildings of adjacent streets. From what is visible, we get an idea of the structure. A section of the small amphitheater is clearly visible. This was probably also used by some viewers to attend gladiator training (exactly as nowadays fans can attend training sessions for soccer teams they support). On the short sides, there were stages for the authorities. Towards Via Labicana, we find 14 rectangular rooms that were all used by the gladiators for sleeping. Since this is where gladiators learned to fight, the weapons that were used were harmless and wooden to avoid serious injury or even death of the gladiator. It seems that the emperor Commodus, who was big fan of gladiatorial games, also performed and lodged here. The life of the *ludus magnus*, built by Domitian at the end of the first century A.D., was obviously linked to that of the Colosseum and, when (in the early fifth century A.D.) gladiatorial games were banned, the *raison d'etre* for this complex started to vanish. A century after prohibition of the gladiatorial games, the *ludus magnus* was abandoned and later used as a cemetery until it was obscured for centuries. Excavations that brought it back to light were performed in 1937 and again in 1959 and 1961.



Fig. 12. Ruins of the Ludus Magnus.

Next to the *ludus magnus*, there were other structures used for the organization of the games in the Colosseum. When a gladiator died, before his funeral^[29], he was brought to a place called *spoliarium* where his armor was removed. The armor and weapons were not only valuable in many cases, they were primarily also the property of the *lanista*, who was the manager of the gladiators. If they were not returned to him, they were brought to the *armamentarium*, which was another building located around the Colosseum, where weapons and armor were not only stored, but also repaired. The *spoliarium* must have been a horrible place to say the least. During major games we have to imagine the piles of corpses here with the consequent pungent smell of death and blood still flowing. There is also the possibility that some of these corpses were used as food for the wild beasts. In this cruel way, the Romans fed wild animals and another purpose was also served (with their typical pragmatism): to let the beasts get used to the taste of human flesh. Accustomed to a different kind of meat and kept with no food before the shows, the animals were more than ready to tear down the unfortunate victim when it was their turn. Animals were initially also stored in the *spoliarium*, which would have increased the stench of this terrifying environment. A gruesome trade also began in the *spoliarium*: the blood of gladiators was sold and marketed because it was considered to be an aphrodisiac. When a gladiator was wounded but still alive, he was instead brought to the

saniarium, where, as the word may suggest, he received the care and attention of medical staff, similar to what happens today with athletes. Since gladiators were the property of the *lanista*, who invested a lot of money in their training and maintenance, doctors working in this industry were among the best to be found. The value of the gladiators and the turnover of lives were good reasons for the *lanista* to invest in the best available doctors.

The scenes, landscapes, machineries, theater scenarios, costumes, and all kinds of equipment for the grandiose scenery of the Colosseum were prepared and stored in the aforementioned *sumum choragium*. This was a huge warehouse/workshop for the preparation of all that was necessary for hunting shows or mythological representations. The public must have been left speechless when seeing a rural setting with real trees populated by live bears, ostriches, deer, hippos, elephants, and many other animals.

The *ludus magnus* was not the only barracks near the Colosseum. There were others and they were all built by Domitian at the end of the first century A.D. The barracks were all similar to each other, since they had a mini-amphitheater for training, porticoed spaces, and rooms for the gladiators. There was the *ludus Dacicus*, so-called because initially it was destined only for war prisoners from Dacia (first century A.D.), modern-day Romania[30]. Later, they hosted any gladiator. The *ludus Gallicus* was smaller and stood at the foot of the Caelian hill. Originally, it hosted only gladiators of Gallic origin[31]; hence its name. The *ludus matutinus* was the place used to train for fights against wild animals. Its name can be explained by the fact that these type of shows was always organized in the morning. The *ludus matutinus* was at the foot of the Caelian hill and in 1938 its foundations were discovered. The last barrack we know of, thanks to different sources (especially Horace in 10 B.C.), is *ludus Aemilius*, which was subsequently transformed into a thermal bath.

The Colosseum in the centuries after the Romans

*As long as the Colossus stands, so shall Rome;
when the Colossus falls, Rome shall fall;
when Rome falls, so falls the world.*

(Venerable Bede)

The Flavian amphitheater was inaugurated in 80 A.D. by the emperor Titus, son of Vespasian. The latter died a year before

completion of the largest amphitheater in the empire and so did not see the end of the work he so strongly desired. According to sources, the inauguration was a memorable event. There were 100 consecutive days of performances with hunting and gladiatorial games and maybe even naval battles. It was an extraordinary event, appreciated by the audience, who were amazed by the grandeur of what Titus offered. The reign of this emperor was very short (79–81 A.D.) and was characterized mainly by this event and a tragedy of immense proportions: the eruption of Vesuvius, which caused the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum. The amphitheater remained in operation for four and a half centuries, during which time it was severely remodeled and restored. It was often damaged by fire: although the main structure was made of stone, the wooden elements in the basement, the planks of the arena, the rafters of the *velarium*, the stands, and the roof of the last level all helped to fuel the fire, calcining the stones in such a way that maintenance or replacement was required. A virtually complete reconstruction was needed after 217 A.D., when lightning ignited a fire of gigantic proportions. Embers and fire fell into the arena, spread to the wooden floor, then to the wooden structures underground, and eventually to the rest of the building. The Colosseum quickly became a huge torch. That was the worst fire in the history of the amphitheater. Almost all of the structures you see today when you visit the Colosseum date back to the restorations completed immediately afterwards. Five years after this fire, the amphitheater was opened again; however, it took roughly thirty years to return it to its ancient splendor. Another milestone in the history of the Colosseum occurred in the year 410 A.D. At this time, for the first time in 800 years, Rome was invaded by the Goths of Alaric, who furiously ravaged and plundered the city. At that time, the Colosseum was abandoned and the area surrounding it was used as a cemetery. As a result of the raids, the population of Rome decreased sharply. One of the last gladiatorial fights dates back to 438 A.D. Although the Christianization of Rome and changing attitudes of the people towards the bloody gladiatorial games were also influences, the main reason for the end of the games was the financial and military crisis of the Western part of the empire together with the many invasions suffered. No emperor could now afford the huge costs needed to organize the games, and consequently, the building remained unused. The fifth century was characterized by a series of earthquakes and continuous restorations of a structure, which began to suffer visibly. Less than a century after the last gladiatorial game in

the arena (in 523 A.D.), Theodoric organized the very last game in the Colosseum. The Western Roman Empire had formally ceased to exist many years earlier and the splendor and glory of the largest amphitheater of the empire was only a distant memory. At the beginning of the fifth century, part of the hydraulic and sewage system no longer functioned and perhaps even before the last hunting games the Romans began stripping and reusing materials and structures. Although the amphitheater was officially still in use at the beginning of the sixth century, it was now decidedly oversized due to the drastic decline in the population of Rome. It was then that the recycling of materials began: large amounts of travertine could be baked to produce lime. Everything got a new life: the tuff blocks, slabs of marble, iron clamps that held the blocks of travertine, lead from the plumbing, and bricks. After the magnificence and wealth of the Romans and the long history of the Colosseum, it was now forced to play the role of a huge quarry. In the late sixth century, Rome had less than 100,000 inhabitants: it had become a small center concentrated in a tiny inhabited nucleus surrounded by deserted areas populated with convents, gardens, farms, and magnificent ruins. This was the picturesque status that the city held until the end of the 19th century. At that time, the Colosseum was outside the city, which had gathered on the banks of the river, and away from the usual routes. In the ninth century, other earthquakes resulted in further damage. The amphitheater slowly became covered with vegetation and stories that wild animals, including wolves, frequented the area started to spread. At the same time, ground level slowly rose, so now only part of the arches of the ground floor showed. Between the ninth and tenth centuries, there was a surge in the construction of townhouses inside the Colosseum. In that period, the amphitheater (or what remained) belonged to the church of Santa Maria Nova; the houses owned by the church, with one or two floors, a kitchen garden, a fireplace, and a courtyard, were sold or rented. You can still see traces of the roofs of these houses on some arches of the ground floor. The houses were mostly occupied by artisans: workers, wheelwrights, blacksmiths, lime burners, and shoemakers. Since it was a place frequented by pilgrims on their way to the Lateran, where the Pope resided in the Middle Ages, many moneychangers also settled there. In 1084, Robert the Guiscard, the head of the army of Normans, sacked Rome and devastated the area between the Lateran and the Colosseum. The city became a target and ownership was disputed by powerful baronial families, who were fighting with each other and living in tall

frightening towers that offered them protection (some of these towers are still visible throughout the city as a reminder of the turbulent centuries of the Middle Ages). One of the most prominent and powerful families, the Frangipane, occupied the Colosseum and transformed it into a fortified residence protected with walls. The fortress of the Frangipane in the Colosseum occupied much of the east side. In 1216, the family of Annibaldi (another of the baronial families of medieval Rome) attempted to seize the Frangipane fortress. The contest lasted many years: the Annibaldi managed to seize the Colosseum, but were then forced to return it to the Church in 1312. In 1349, there was a tremendous earthquake, the “big one”, the strongest that the city ever experienced. This was a devastating earthquake, also mentioned by the Italian poet Petrarch, which caused much damage and killed many people. The whole southern side of the Colosseum collapsed. In the same century, the popes abandoned Rome and moved to Avignon in southern France. The population was further reduced and the area around the Colosseum became infamous and dangerous, full of thieves, robbers, and prostitutes. Many years later, in 1439, other materials from the amphitheater were used to build the tribune of St. John in the Lateran. This marked the beginning of a period of massive dispossession of marble, brick, and tuff from the Colosseum to build palaces and churches. Between 1451 and 1452, in the construction of St. Peter’s Basilica, 2,522 wagons of materials were used. Some years earlier, an area of the Colosseum was donated to the confraternity of the Gonfalone, which since 1490 was allowed to keep representations of the Passion of Christ in the amphitheater. At that time, it was common to believe that this was the site of the martyrdom and killing of many early Christians. In 1519, the confraternity built the chapel of Santa Maria della Pietà inside the Colosseum, but, when the Passion plays were banned 20 years later because of excessive costs and the unrest and riots caused by hatred for the Jews instigated by the clergy during Holy Week, the church was abandoned. In this period, the property of the Colosseum was divided between this confraternity, the Apostolic Camera, and the Roman Senate. The license to remove materials had become an important source of income for the popes, who took advantage of its availability for their projects, while officially, in their speeches and edicts, they encouraged the preservation of Roman ruins. Pope Sixtus V (1585–1590) intended to use the amphitheater as a factory, placing machines on the ground floor and housing the workers on the upper floors. His favorite architect, Domenico Fontana, was in charge of the

project for this industrial conversion, but fortunately never found the funds to start the works. In 1600s, Gian Lorenzo Bernini was commissioned to build a church dedicated to Christian martyrs in the center of the arena. Also, in this case, the lack of funds prevented its realization and the monument was once again a receptacle for criminals and derelicts. In 1700, Pope Clement XI used the Colosseum to store manure for the production of saltpeter for the benefit of a nearby gunpowder factory. Three years later, other pieces of marbles collapsed because of an earthquake and were employed by Clement XI for the construction of the Port of Ripetta, which no longer exists. After decades of neglect, a year before the Jubilee of 1750, Pope Benedict XIV declared the monument a public church, which was consecrated to the memory of the Passion of Christ and His Martyrs. This finally put an end to centuries of despoliation. A papal edict forbade any violation of the ruins and Stations of the Cross were placed at the edge of the arena. Towards the end of the century, the French led by Napoleon invaded Italy in 1798 and, a few days before arresting Pope Pius VI and locking him up, after a long and painful journey in the citadel of Valence, they claimed the Roman Republic. According to a project of the French, the Colosseum was intended to become part of a large archeological park. At this time, projects for the preservation of the monument, which was in a dire condition, started to be developed. After a few years, in 1820, during the pontificate of Pius VII, the ends of the outer ring were reinforced and the architect Stern built the spur of bricks on the northwest side (towards the Oppian hill). In 1826, Leo XII asked Valadier to build another spur on the other side, which is now the most famous and photographed. From 1840 onwards, other arches were rebuilt and restored by Gaspere Salvi on the side of the Caelian hill. These arches are easily recognizable because they are made of bricks and they contrast sharply with the travertine portions. In 1870 (*Fig. 13*), Rome became the capital of the new Kingdom of Italy, but works to permanently free the arena began only four years later. Half of the debris and soil from the arena were removed and excavations reached the floor. Some years later, the entire facade on the north side was cleared of debris that had accumulated for centuries. During the fascist regime, in an attempt to connect past imperial glories of ancient Rome with the birth of the new fascist empire, the Colosseum was used for propaganda gatherings. Many capitals and columns were damaged during those events. The Colosseum was adapted to accommodate mass gatherings: connecting stairs that changed the

original structure were built, some corridors were paved, and a small section of the bleachers was rebuilt, but inaccurately. There were no seats, but instead broad steps for the personal chairs of the senators. In the 1930s, the landscape changed completely: the *Velia*, a saddle that linked the Esquilinus to the Palatine, was removed for the construction of Via dell'Impero, now Via dei Fori Imperiali. The *Meta Sudans*, which was a fountain located between the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine, was also dismantled. On the other side of the Colosseum, Via di San Gregorio was broadened, and in the 1940s a subway line was built that recklessly cut through the foundations of the amphitheater on the west side and severely damaged corridors pertaining to the sewer. Even today, in exceptional rains, flooding of the underground may occur. During World War II, the Colosseum became a bomb shelter and the German army even turned it into a weapons cache. After the war, an indiscriminate increase in traffic turned the Colosseum into the largest roundabout in Europe. In the 1970s, traffic was finally banned, at least between the Colosseum and the Arch of Constantine. Today, after more recent repairs and cleaning, the Colosseum is ready to live for another thousand years.



Fig. 13. The Colosseum in 1870.

2. *Hunting games and death sentences*

A glimpse at the program

I think amusement is a serious thing.

(I. Calvino)

During the four and a half centuries of use of the Colosseum, the program of shows and games basically never changed. The games lasted several hours and the spectators were entertained by a large number of shows and performances. Prowling around the Colosseum at dawn on games day would have invoked disturbing sensations. The roar of the big cats, the trumpeting of elephants, the howling of dogs and wolves, the yelps of many other animals were a mere introduction to what would follow a few hours later. The program included morning fights between animals as well as hunting games, called *venationes*. During lunchtime, around noon, executions of those who had committed serious crimes were 'on stage'. Sometimes these performances were interspersed with comedians or pseudo-circus shows. In the afternoon, the expected clashes between gladiators were organized. Ancient sources did not leave us specific reports of a typical day at the Colosseum: many, in fact, describe in passing clashes between animals and gladiator fights, but no one really indulges in descriptions of how all this actually happened. As a consequence, we have to rely on descriptions of the mood at the Colosseum, some fights to the death, praise for gladiators who fearlessly faced death, but unfortunately all documents are fragmentary. Other authors, who openly expressed contempt for this type of public entertainment, do not mention anything. Where does the information we have about the shows come from? If ancient writers did not leave us much to work with, artists were much more prolific with figurative images and reports. Indeed, it is mainly from works of art that we can have a good idea of the games held in the Colosseum and other amphitheaters of the empire. Through mosaics, reliefs, and frescoes, we can find out many details. From this point of view, artists turned out to be much more emotionally involved than writers in describing what was happening in the arena. Many of their representations are not so different from photographs taken of special moments: a gladiator in the moments just before death; a wild beast jumping on a man to tear him to pieces; the referee interrupting a fight between gladiators when one of them can no longer continue.

They are "snapshots" of moments of pure spectacle for the Romans who certainly impressed the artists and their patrons. Many of these works of art, especially mosaics, decorated the private homes of wealthy patrons, who loved to show off the luxury of their homes to guests and remind everyone that they worked for and became rich thanks to the world of games.

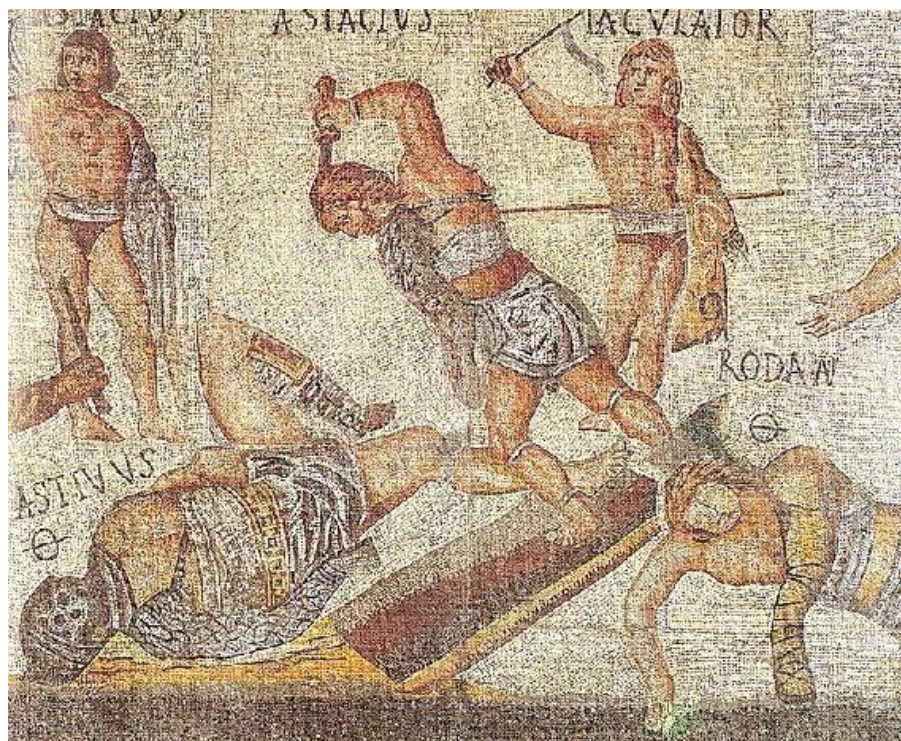


Fig. 14. Theso-called “Gladiator Mosaic”. Borghese Gallery, Rome

Financing the program for a single day entailed high costs, which, in most cases, only the emperor could support, especially at the Colosseum. Several games, however, were financed by the nobility or even by politicians who wanted to gain supporters in a fast, if costly, way. It was a kind of electoral campaign that could yield very durable fruits, especially if the games were successful: the name of the man who had financed them was not quickly forgotten.

Hunting games and animal fights

Hunting is always a form of war.

(J. W. Goethe)

Despite the fact that the gladiators were the most popular part of the games, the hunting shows still represented an exceptional attraction. The hunts, or *venationes*, also called *ludi matutini* (morning shows) took place in the morning. Before the imperial age, they were completely separate from gladiatorial combats and were never organized alongside gladiatorial fights within the same games. These two events gradually became unified by Augustus between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D.

The origins of the hunts predate the construction of the Colosseum. They were already popular, appreciated, and organized in the Circus Maximus, which was the oldest and largest building for shows in Rome and in the empire. Even during the imperial age, after the construction of the Colosseum, many hunting games continued to be staged in the Circus Maximus, since this had larger tracks and ensured greater capacity. We should not forget that the Circus Maximus was immensely bigger than the Colosseum in terms of extension of the arena and capacity. It had a track that was 600 meters long and 100 meters

wide (190 and 330 ft, respectively) and it could accommodate about 250,000 spectators; a capacity nearly 5 times that of the Colosseum.

The Flaminio Circus, lesser known today, was also used for hunting games before the Colosseum came into existence. It was located not far from the Tiber, approximately where today the Theater of Marcellus stands, and for this reason was mostly used when water shows were organized. For example, it was used when Augustus decided to stage a show with 36 crocodiles in favor of his sons Gaius and Lucius.

As far as we know, the first hunting game in Rome took place in 252 B.C. with elephants, which were the first exotic animals seen by Romans at that time. The games were set in the Circus Maximus and provided a struggle between men armed with arrows and elephants intent on survival. Almost 60 years later, ostriches were used, but there was a longer wait to see more wild animals. In 186 B.C., for the first time, lions and panthers were hunted before the amazed eyes of the Romans. From then on, the *venationes* became one of the most popular forms of entertainment in Rome. As a consequence, the variety of wild animals increased, together with the surprise of the audience at each new game.

Why were the ancient Romans so surprised and excited to see wild

animals dying like that? An explanation is that in those days travelling was prohibitive for most people. Tourism as we know it today did not exist, except for a lucky few. Only nobles, merchants, couriers, emperors, or people invested with diplomatic missions had the chance to travel. The vast majority of the population of Rome could not travel, and consequently, did not have the opportunity to see animals living in completely different habitats. Watching the hunting shows was therefore the only chance to see live animals for a good part of the Roman population. A good example of this was given by Julius Caesar in 46 B.C.: to celebrate his triumph, he showed a giraffe to his people for the first time. No one had ever seen an animal like that before, but eventually giraffes were not among the favorites for the Romans, since they were too docile and did not provide enough entertainment during the shows. Why did the Romans organize hunting games? What was their purpose? The explanation lies in a desire to demonstrate in front of a large audience that Rome was so strong that even the natural world bent to its will. Basically, as in many other cases, the real queen of the games was propaganda.

The morning program was usually divided into three parts: it began with fights between animals, followed by circus-like shows, and finally the hunting games. How did animals react when they were brought into the arena? After hours spent in the darkness underground, suddenly being thrust into the full sunlight surrounded by thousands of screaming people must have been unsettling. As a consequence, it was never possible to know in advance how a particular animal might react. Some were literally paralyzed by fear, became listless, and did nothing. However, the organizers could not risk a boring show and so the keepers were always ready to incite, prod, and stimulate them with branding irons or fire. The fights took place in accordance to combinations of animals that were never announced to the public in advance. The program of the games was posted in many streets of Rome specifying which animals (but not which combinations) would clash, and it was designed in such a way as to increase expectations and curiosity and generate a buzz in the audience. From different sources, we know that clashes between bears and bulls, lions and leopards, elephants and bulls, or buffaloes and rhinos were among the most popular, since they resulted in spectacular fights. The animals used did not receive any mercy: if they did not die from their injuries, they were slaughtered by hunters and spared only if they could be employed in other fights.

When the fights ended, lighter shows with domesticated animals were staged. Once more the aim was to impress the audience: elephants traced phrases in Latin in the sand of the arena with their trunks; wild boars, bears, tigers, or leopards dressed in a kind of armor imitated fighting between gladiators; panthers pulled racing carts; or hares and rabbits were released into the arena in front of predators, such as lions or tigers, who had to chase them, but not harm them, and bring them safely, in their mouth, to their keepers. Sometimes, however, things did not go according to plan: trained animals would suddenly become wild; thus changing completely the type of entertainment offered.

Once the performances with domesticated animals were concluded, it was finally time for the *venationes*: the long-awaited fights between wild animals and humans. Here, the only weapon the hunters were allowed to use was a kind of long spear and sometimes arrows or a dagger (*gladius*[\[33\]](#)). In most cases, hunters wore a short tunic that left the legs uncovered to allow unrestricted movement, but at times they were armed and dressed as gladiators, that is, with a sword, helmet, armor, and shield. Hunters could be accompanied by dogs or be on horseback. Generally, the hunts began with unaggressive animals: gazelles, donkeys, ostriches, antelopes, and other animals were released into the arena and easily killed. At the end, once the stage was cleaned, the hunting games continued, but this time with big cats and wild animals such as tigers, lions, panthers, bears, leopards, and elephants. In most cases, the hunts ended with the death of the animals, but in rare cases hunters died after being torn apart by the beasts. Sometimes hunters who won the confrontations with wild animals would be requested to fight again by the public. This could happen if the public was not satisfied with the performance of the hunter and in this case the chances that the hunter would be killed were higher due to exhaustion resulting from the first clash.

Who were the hunters? Where did they come from? The hunters could be war prisoners used as instruments to entertain the people; criminals; or even free men, who, attracted by easy money, dedicated themselves to this type of activity. In Rome, hunters were trained in special barracks near the Colosseum, the abovementioned *ludus matutinus*, where they could be trained differently from the gladiators. Perhaps Rome represented an exception from this point of view, and it is possible that in other parts of the empire hunters lived and shared the same spaces as the gladiators, but followed different training

programs. Differently from the gladiators, the hunters did not enjoy great popularity: their undertakings were not seen as heroic and they could not inflame the public as much as those who fought other men to the death. Few hunters are still remembered. Carpophorus, a native of northern Europe, was an exception. According to Martial, on the occasion of the games for the inauguration of the Colosseum, he killed 20 beasts to the delight of the audience. However, he remains an isolated case in the long history of the hunters of the Colosseum.

Not just lions!

A lion doesn't die, he sleeps.

(Walt Disney, "The Lion King")

When one thinks about the animals used in the Colosseum, the first image that comes to mind is a roaring lion wandering around the arena in search of his prey or tearing apart a poor man. In reality, lions were not the only exotic animals to be captured, transported, and used in the Colosseum. Over the centuries, the Roman audience had the "good fortune" to see a number and wide variety of animals at home without the travel possibilities available to us now. Where did the Romans find all of these animals? Crocodiles, rhinos, hippos, and giraffes came from southern Egypt. Gazelles, antelopes, jackals, ostriches, hyenas, lions, cheetahs, panthers, and elephants came from North Africa, and bears were from the Atlas Mountains in Morocco. Until the first century B.C., Middle Eastern countries bordering the Mediterranean provided several species of felines. Tigers (*Fig. 15*) had travelled extensively before reaching Rome. They were taken from India and seen by the Romans for the first time in the first century B.C. Italy and other European countries provided all herbivores, such as hares, roe deer, deer, wild pigs, and donkeys, as well as bears, bison, bulls, wolves, or moose. The costs of capture, transportation, and maintenance of wild animals from Africa or Asia were understandably much higher than those of the animals coming from Italy or Europe... no coincidence that the majority of games in the Colosseum were sponsored by the emperor! He was the only one who had sufficient financial resources to organize these expensive slaughters. Today, we have reports of great hunting shows not only after the construction of the Colosseum, but also earlier than that. For example, in 104 B.C., Muzio Scaevola and Licinius Crassus, staged a *venatio* in the Circus Maximus with a hundred lions to celebrate their victory over Jugurtha, King of Numidia. In the middle of that same

century, Marcus Scaurus organized a hunt with 5 crocodiles, 1 hippo, and 150 leopards. A few years later, the grandeur of all of this was completely surpassed by the incredible spectacle offered by the rich Pompey. During the games, he organized the slaughter of 400 leopards, 600 elephants, and many monkeys. The special guests at this carnage were a rhino and a lynx from northern Europe. This was the grandest *venatio* ever held before the construction of the Colosseum and a show with so many animals was never repeated. Neither Julius Caesar nor even Augustus, the first Roman emperor, who killed three thousands and five hundreds animals during his reign, managed, in a single show, to surpass the magnitude of the one organized by Pompey. Nero brought in 300 lions and 400 bears, and during the 100 days of parties and games arranged by Titus for the inauguration of the Colosseum 9,000 animals were killed. This number is still small compared with the 11,000 reached by Trajan almost thirty years later to celebrate his victories over the Dacians. With the years, however, these numbers began to decrease and a very interesting phenomenon occurred in the third century A.D. The number of animals procured for the emperor at the Colosseum stayed very high, but the types of animals provided changed significantly. In particular, with the economic crisis more herbivores than carnivores were used. This change was also due to specific environmental factors. For centuries, the Romans had hunted big cats from North Africa or the Middle East. After centuries of savage hunting, some species simply became extinct in many of these areas, whereas some animals moved further south, since many of these areas were converted into olive groves, vineyards, and wheat fields. This is also one of the reasons why today there are no lions or elephants in North African countries. After being hunted for centuries, they disappeared from that part of the Roman Empire and found refuge just south of the Sahara desert, where they can be seen still today. In ancient times, hunting was not perceived as badly as it is today: large predators were a danger to people living in those areas and hunting these animals was considered necessary for safety. The indigenous people of those areas were extremely grateful to the Romans for their service of "liberation" and "disinfection" from large predators... until their extinction throughout northern Africa, of course. Initially, the scarcity of animals from certain territories did not worry the emperors. They believed that, if wild animals disappeared from some areas, they just had to venture into areas where they could still be found. However, the difficulty of finding animals, combined with ever higher costs of transport and maintenance, forced the

organizers of the shows to gradually change the programs offered. For every animal arriving in Rome, one had to count many others who died during transport due to penury or different climatic conditions. Rome, compared with Africa or Middle East, was colder and not all animals could survive the long journey that awaited them before being slaughtered in the Colosseum.



Fig. 15. Mosaic showing a fight with tiger. Mosaic Museum, Istanbul.

Life (and death) of the animals

Among all the animals, man is the cruelest. He is the only one to inflict pain for the sake of it.

(M. Twain)

Initially, hunting was not popular for the Romans, but mosaics from the late imperial time period and paintings of catches, shipping, and transport show that, thanks to the hunting games, this became a traditional activity. The capture and transportation of animals was a huge undertaking, since the animals had to stay healthy and travel for thousands of miles. They were coming from faraway places throughout the empire and what made the hunt even more dangerous was the fact that animals obviously had to be taken alive. Once on the ships, the animals had to be fed and kept in good condition, but the risks were very high that many of them would perish during the journey. Animals could die from infections caused by unaccustomed foods, mistreatment by impatient custodians, self-procured wounds

while in captivity, or climate differences. In practice, how were animals, especially the most dangerous ones, captured? Which techniques did the Romans use? First of all, the organizer of the games estimated the numbers of animals to be used and then the governors of the provinces where these animals could be captured were contacted to check whether their region could meet the demand. Only then did the mission to capture the requested animals begin. They were captured by specially trained army units, whose members greatly appreciated this activity because it was seen as a pleasant distraction from daily routine at the edges of the empire. The main tools used were nets and laces (ancestors of the more modern lasso) to pull on the neck of the beasts, which were eventually placed in cages. Herbivores were caught without particular risks, but required skill, patience, good reflexes, and reliable dogs; harmless traps without spikes were used to capture wild boars, deer, or antelopes without injuring them. In the case of bison or bulls, paddocks were built and the animals were directed towards them with the help of dogs. Alternatively, pits were dug in the ground and they were forced into them. Felines were hunted with a different technique. Hunters first dug several pits for use as traps; then they placed a securely tied goat or lamb atop a pillar of wood, clay, or stone; and hid the pit with branches and twigs. The lambs or goats would start bleating and attract the attention of a predator. As soon as the big cat jumped on his prey, he would fall down into the pit without any possibility of escape. The hunters would then drop down a cage with some meat inside and, as soon as the beast entered the cage, they would close it and pull it up. An alternative system was to push the predators towards an enclosure where an open cage was placed. The animals were forced in this direction with the help of horses and torches. A bit of meat was put inside the cage and, as soon as the cat entered, the cage would be closed and transported further. In a very similar way, animals could also be trapped in robust nets and then dragged inside the cage. To capture elephants, normally the hunter had to hurt its legs with arrows to reduce the possibility of movement and to be able to tie them smoothly. Alternatively, the elephants were forced to move towards a fairly deep hole, which was then closed with nets to prevent any possible escape. The elephants were left there for a few days to be trained or to wait until they no longer resisted, so that they could be tied and moved out. Bears instead were harassed by dogs and captured with nets or pits in the ground.

As we can see, the hunters developed different techniques for each

type of animal and in a short time this kind of business began flourishing so much that specialized agencies were opened in northern Africa to hire hunters.

Transporting the animals to Rome remained the most complex part of the entire operation. At those times, travelling was not easy and involved a number of risks, the main one of which was death of the animals. The percentage of animals reaching their destination alive was very low, despite all of the precautions taken during the journey. This was mostly by sea, which was the fastest way to travel at that time. The animals would be brought to a collection point and from there to special boats. The fiercest animals were closed in strong cages, whereas herbivores generally had more freedom of movement. Food also had to be arranged and sometimes this meant a few tons of food, especially in the case of large herbivores, such as elephants. Storms were one of the main risks during the journey: in a storm, the possibility of survival was not very high. Once in Rome, the animals that survived the journey disembarked in Ostia and from there they were transported along the Tiber river to the city. The journey along the river was against the stream. Elephants were an exception, since they probably made the last part of the journey to reach Rome by land. Eventually, the animals were collected in special *vivaria*, which were facilities where they were partially trained and fed during the days preceding the shows. Different from modern zoos, in Rome there was no interest in faithfully reproducing the habitats of the hunted animals. The majority of them would have died quickly and there was no reason to brighten the little life that was left before the first hunting shows. It is also for this reason that the *vivaria* were situated far from "sensitive" areas, such as the Senate, the Forum, or the residence of the emperor. For example, we know that one of the *vivaria* was placed inside the Amphitheatrum Castrense, near the actual basilica of the Holy Cross of Jerusalem. Usually, the day before the show, the animals were brought to the Colosseum, where they were harnessed and dressed up for presentation to the spectators before the games. After the presentation procession, they were brought back to the basement where they waited for their moment in the arena to fight for their lives in front of thousands of cheering Romans.

Dead animals: what to do?

There are two things that always surprised me: the intelligence of

animals and the bestiality of men.

(T. Bernard)

Thousands of animals were slaughtered during the shows, so what was their destiny once they were killed? Where were they taken? The ones that were not particularly heavy were placed on carts, driven away, and thrown into ditches, ravines, or isolated places. Others were used to feed those trained predators that could survive for several days in the games: a practical way to guarantee them food without any additional cost. Heavier animals, such as rhinos, elephants, hippos, and even lions and tigers, had to be disposed in alternative ways to prevent the bodies from rotting or worms from proliferating and spreading diseases. The way the Romans solved this problem was brilliant: they gave the meat from these animals to the spectators at the Colosseum. In this way, they not only disposed of dead animals, but also showed once again the generosity of the emperor who had financed the shows. Who distributed the meat and how did this happen? The meat was not distributed among senators, knights, or wealthy Romans who possessed sufficient financial resources to buy it without having to beg for it at the Colosseum. Furthermore, for these people, it was not considered to be in line with their social position to get meat in this way. All those Romans who did not have sufficient financial means to vary their diet and could not buy any meat benefited from these distributions. A large number of Romans who lived thanks to free distributions of grain and, exceptionally, also of wine and oil, had to rely on these imperial initiatives for extra. The emperors were obviously well aware of this and knew perfectly well that donations of meat were well received by those citizens in need. What better way than to ensure food free of charge to make sure that the people were happy? Meat that was distributed mostly came from small animals, such as pheasants, hares, or rabbits, but meat from large animals was also regularly dispensed. The beasts whose meat was dispensed had to be healthy and suitable for consumption. The distribution was not done chaotically by letting people into the arena at the end of games to grab the best beast. This would have created confusion that was difficult to manage. Instead, a sort of lottery was used. At the end of each show, wooden pellets containing numbers were thrown at the stands. Each number corresponded to an item that could be collected upon exiting the Colosseum. Not all spectators received meat: there were those who would bring home a pitcher, a vase, some oil, or wine, but there were

also those who obtained meat or skins of dead animals. Obviously, if one "won" a hare or rabbit, the "prize" could be withdrawn immediately, but for larger animals it was necessary to wait for the butchers to slaughter and prepare them. Only then could one receive a piece of meat. So, it was not unusual, at the end of a day of games, to see people in Rome returning home with a large piece of meat on their shoulders. This was also imperial propaganda.

Death sentences

There is no remedy for birth and death except enjoying the interval.

(A. Schopenhauer)

Once the performances with animals were finished, around noon public executions started. Death sentences were publicly conducted as a deterrent, so that everyone could see the consequences of committing serious crimes. Moreover, at the same time, enduring a horrible death in front of thousands of people was a further price to pay for the criminals. Early Christian writers, who witnessed the conviction of their fellow believers because of their faith, are the sources we have today that document death sentences in the amphitheaters of the empire. It is thanks to them that we have more information about the death sentences than the gladiatorial combats. However, we still have no clear evidence that Christians were executed inside the Colosseum. Undoubtedly, Christians were killed in the Colosseum, but, as far as we know, their religion was not the reason for their sentence. The prisoners were presented in the Colosseum during the initial procession, while attendants displayed signs stating the crimes committed for the benefit of the public. Sometimes the sign was placed directly on the condemned himself. Initially, the majority of people sentenced to death were fugitives, deserters, and rebels, but later this punishment was extended to other types of crimes and war prisoners as well. Executions could be of different natures: some were killed with a sword (*ad gladium*), others were thrown to wild animals (*ad bestias*), others burned alive (*crematio* or *ad flammam*), others crucified (*crucifixio*), and yet more were obliged to impersonate characters of myth destined to die. In the last case, the set required to represent the myth was recreated on the arena and the main character, then doomed to succumb, was the person to be executed. This kind of execution was probably devised to make the lunch break more exciting, since in many cases the death sentences were considered boring. The re-enactment of the myth of Orpheus, a

great singer, who was grief-stricken by the pain of losing his Eurydice, was very popular. Orpheus sang his love in such an enchanting way that the forest animals were enraptured by the beauty of his music. In the reconstruction, the animals approaching the condemned were not gentle at all and eventually he was eaten alive. Another very popular myth was that of Icarus, son of Daedalus, builder of the labyrinth of Knossos, who escaped from the island of Crete using wings designed by his father. However, he came too close to the sun and the wax used to keep the feathers together melted and Icarus plunged to his death. In the Colosseum version, the poor man was forced to climb up scaffolding and then to jump to his death in a flurry of blood and feathers. Re-enactments of historical events related to the origins of the city of Rome were particularly appreciated. The story of Mutio Scevola is an example of this. He was insensitive to pain and faced the Etruscan Porsenna by placing his right hand in a fire without showing any reaction to the pain. The condemned had to do the same thing, but with one difference: if he screamed from the pain, he was burned alive in a pall of burning pitch. It was not uncommon for those sentenced to death to commit suicide before the show to avoid the terrible death that awaited them in the arena. To prevent this, prisoners who awaited their fate in the underground of the Colosseum were always watched by staff working in the underground rooms. It has to be emphasized that there was also a vast difference if the criminal was a Roman citizen or not. If the convicted had Roman citizenship, the most common way to kill him was through decapitation; this was an honorable way to die, which, according to the Romans, avoided public humiliation or a slow or particularly brutal death. Only rarely did one see a Roman citizen sentenced in other ways. Sentences *ad gladium* could result in beheadings, but also in one-sided fights, with a foregone conclusion, among the helpless condemned who faced the arena and a gladiator. Sentences *ad bestias* involved a criminal who was mauled by wild animals. The first sentence of this kind was imposed in 167 B.C. on some members of the Roman army guilty of having abandoned the field of battle of Pydna in Macedonia. They were considered culprits of infamy and, as a consequence, were trampled by elephants. Legally speaking, Roman law did not determine which execution had to be inflicted and the judge was free to choose whether to inflict the *damnatio ad bestias* as the death penalty at his discretion. This was most likely inflicted more frequently if the social background of the offender was low, like for prisoners or slaves. Up to the time of Tiberius (14–37 A.D.), the

second Roman emperor, a master could have a slave killed by animals without him being able to appeal or defend himself. With the *lex Petronia*, it was imposed upon the Court to review the reasons for a particular execution; thus dismissing an easy way for a master to get rid of his slaves.

Execution with animals had to meet specific requirements in the show: the convicts should not take too long to die because this would slow down the program of the day, but, at the same time, they should not die too quickly and spoil the show. The two most common ways to perform the *damnatio ad bestias* were to tie the naked criminal to a pole and leave him/her for the animals or to let him run around the arena being chased by the beast. The final result did not change, but the public preferred the latter because it was considered to be more spectacular. Was it possible to save someone's life? Yes, it happened a few times, but the life of the lucky one was not extended by much, since he was used in the next fight or had his throat cut. Grace was extremely rare for those sentenced either *ad gladium* or *ad bestias*.

Crucifixion was also used and was a punishment much more ancient than the Romans. This could result in an agonizing death by suffocation because the thorax was compressed (which is why the legs of the condemned were often broken), by asphyxiation, by bleeding, or by cardiovascular collapse through pain. This was without doubt the cruelest sentence staged in the Colosseum. However, those sentenced by *crematio* or *ad flammam* did not have a much more pleasant time. The convicts had to wear beautifully decorated clothes soaked with flammable substances and then they had to dance as their clothes were ignited. The resulting dances were anything but pleasant. This was the punishment reserved by Nero for the Christians in his private circus in the Vatican. The condemned were even covered with resin, wax, and papyrus to burn more spectacularly.

At the end of the death sentences, an attendant dressed as Charon, the ferryman of souls across the Styx, the river of hell, entered the arena to remove the corpses. This character was based on that of Charun, Etruscan god of death, who always entered the stage together with the god Mercury, who accompanied the souls. What 'Mercury' actually did at the Colosseum was to pierce the tip of a large red-hot spear into the flesh of the victims to make sure they were really dead. If that was the case, Charon would hit the victims with a hammer; thus symbolically taking possession of them. After this further macabre ritual, regular attendants cleaned up the arena of the corpses.

Everything had to be ready for the next show.

3. The gladiators

Who were the gladiators?

Courage is the first of human qualities because it is the one that guarantees all others.

(W. Churchill)

In the afternoon, the gladiatorial combats, which were the most awaited performance by the Roman public, took place. Who was behind the duels of gladiators? Who were these people who defied death? Where did they come from?

Initially, gladiators were war prisoners from distant lands who brought an exotic character to their performances, along with costumes that were unusual for the Romans. During the expansion of the Roman Empire (i.e., until the second century A.D.), war provided most of the gladiators. Because of their country of origin and peculiar arms used, some of these prisoners gave birth to particular categories of gladiators. The prisoners had to fight as living proof that the empire had spread to distant lands. Thracian, Gauls, Jews, Britons, Sunnis, and Germans: their origin spoke of achievements that were trumpeted through the games. Among the gladiators, there were also slaves sold from their masters to the *lanista*, who was the gladiators' manager. This was a convenient and effective system for those people who wanted to get rid of a slave for whatever reason. If the slave was mighty, brave, and lucky, he could hope to be freed after a few years of gladiatorial service. Also, all those who were sentenced *ad ludum*, which means to be gladiators (or hunters), because of their crimes could be seen fighting in the arena. Generally, these were strong men who could obtain a leave from fighting after three years and complete freedom after five. When the empire stopped expanding, this particular category of convict gladiators became the main supply of gladiators. However, there were also people who freely chose to become gladiators: generally, they were desperate men who wanted to escape a financial crisis and hoped to earn quick profits, or simply men looking for fame and glory. These citizens signed a contract directly with the *lanista*; thus placing themselves under his authority and agreeing to satisfy all his requests. If necessary, they had to kill, be chained, fight, and be killed on his order. They had to fight whenever needed, without the possibility of choosing their opponent and without the possibility of refusing a fight. The contract was a legal

act and thus included the price of the engagement, its duration, and the number of fights to be fulfilled. By signing this act, the recruits gave up a fundamental privilege of all Roman citizens: the inviolability of the body. A Roman citizen owned his own body, whereas the body of a slave belonged only to his master. Gladiators were considered to be between slaves and free men, although their condition resembled more one of slavery than of free men. Normally, signing of such an agreement involved significant amounts of money on top of that earned from victories in the arena. It was mostly for this reason that more and more men, driven by their thirst for money and despair, decided to become gladiators. The phenomenon was so extensive that Augustus, and two centuries later Septimius Severus, tried to stem it through precise provisions, but they were unsuccessful. Even senators and knights became gladiators or hunters following their desire for glory. The height of this phenomenon was at a time when Nero was ruling: in those years, a huge number of senators and knights turned into gladiators and hunters. In many cases, it was the Nero himself who forced the senators to fight; other times the popularity of a gladiator was perceived to be essential to obtain the favors of the people. Even some emperors wrestled in duels. The aforementioned Commodus, at the end of the second century A.D., was one of them. It should be noted, however, that most likely the duels he participated in were not particularly compelling. Sometimes Commodus could choose his opponents, even among members of the public, who had no combat experience. When fighting with real gladiators, the safety of the emperor was probably agreed in advance.

Those who freely chose to become gladiators were regarded with disdain by Roman citizens for the entire duration of their contract. It was thought that by signing the contract they were guilty of infamy and as a consequence they were looked upon with disgust and disapproval. Having traded their condition of free citizen for that of semi-slavery under the command of a *lanista* was not accepted by society at that time. However, the courage and boldness of these individuals was much appreciated, since it was through gladiators that all ancient virtues were displayed in front of the eyes of the Romans. Discipline, patience, perseverance, and contempt for death were some of the qualities that made Rome great and these were exactly the qualities a gladiator needed to survive. This contradictory attitude resulted in the gladiators being halfway between outcasts of society and heroes who embodied the great qualities of the Romans and soldiers who spread the name of Rome throughout the world.

Another category of gladiators is represented by women! There were also female gladiators, who, from the imperial age, began to fight exactly like men. The practice of fights between female gladiators, however, was not appreciated by historians and writers of the Roman era, but their shows must have had great popularity, if only under the reign of Septimius Severus (second to third centuries A.D.), it was forbidden for women to fight in public performances. Despite this prohibition, female gladiators probably continued to fight publicly, since, in an epigraph found in Ostia, near Rome, there is an inscription from the third century A.D. in which a local magistrate, Ostilianus, was proud that women could fight in his hometown. The dating of the epigraph shows us how much prohibition by the emperor clashed with a practice that was hard to quash and apparently had great success.

The profession of gladiator

Abandon all hope, you who enter here.

(Dante, *Inferno*, Canto III, 9)

All those who entered a school of gladiators became part of a *familia gladiatoria*, which was a corporation of gladiators who lived according to the laws of the barracks where they were housed. A gladiator had given up his freedom and was property of the *lanista*, who would train him, keep him, and once he was effectively a gladiator rent him to the organizers of the games. For the *lanista*, gladiators were not men, but a very lucrative investment. The rental price of a gladiator depended on his prowess, physical strength, age, and training received. The organizer of the games had to pay the agreed sum to the *lanista* and if the gladiator was killed he had to compensate him for the loss by paying his full value. This was a sort of compensation for the loss of potential money for the *lanista*. Because of his lack of scruples, a *lanista* was considered to be even lower in society than those who exploited prostitutes. It is no coincidence that the etymology of the word *lanista* can be traced back to a pejorative change of *lanius*, butcher. For the gladiators, life in the barracks was extremely tough. When not engaged in the arena, they were strictly monitored and those who tried to escape or revolt were severely punished with beatings, chains, or branding[34]. The same treatment was reserved for those who had not fought bravely enough and had left the audience unsatisfied. The harsh living conditions, tension from fear of dying, stress, and the possibility (not always so

remote) of having to fight a colleague or even to kill him to survive brought some gladiators to suicide. For many of them suicide was seen as a real liberation, but it was not always easy to do, since surveillance was always strict. The gladiators were worth a lot of money to the *lanista* and the barracks could not afford suicide. No one would compensate the *lanista* in case of suicide of one of his fighters.

Many people made their living from the lives of the gladiators. It was a world of tailors, artisans, arms manufacturers, and doctors. The last of these were attentive to each gladiator, helping him with treatments and rehabilitation procedures to increase his physical performance and endurance. There were personnel who helped gladiators to stay in shape. Like today's sports teams, there were masseurs (*untores*), who, with ointments and oils, moisturized the skin of the gladiators and massaged their muscles to prevent soreness. Assistants took care of weapons and each barracks had a treasurer and one or more captors who had the task of controlling the potentially most dangerous elements. In most cases, the employees running the barracks were slaves or free men employed by the central power. The person responsible for the *ludus magnus* was normally an official of the imperial administration and had one of the highest salaries of all. Why such a high salary? Because his task entailed a great responsibility, since unrest and riots were real risks, and gladiators could easily become a problem for public order. The emperors were well aware of this and so command of the barracks was generally given to someone extremely trustworthy and strong willed, who was worth the money he earned.

Experienced gladiators who stood out for their courage, cunning, or strength could aspire to receiving the coveted *rudis*, which was a wooden sword symbolizing the cessation of their activity as fighters. Sometimes the public themselves requested the *rudis* for a gladiator who had fought with great courage; thus freeing him from any future combat. The gladiator who achieved this could either quit completely (but cases of full withdrawal were rare) or continue to gravitate around the world of the arena and the barracks by becoming a coach or a referee. Why did a gladiator rarely quit? Because, in most of the cases, the gladiatorial world was all he had and it was difficult to be reintegrated into society. Since a possible career in the army was forbidden, the only hope for those who wanted to leave the gladiatorial combats completely behind was to be hired as a bodyguard of a prominent citizen. Life expectancy was extremely low

for these fighters. Only the best passed their 30th birthdays and only the exceptional reached 40. The majority of gladiators did not survive for more than a year (Fig. 16).

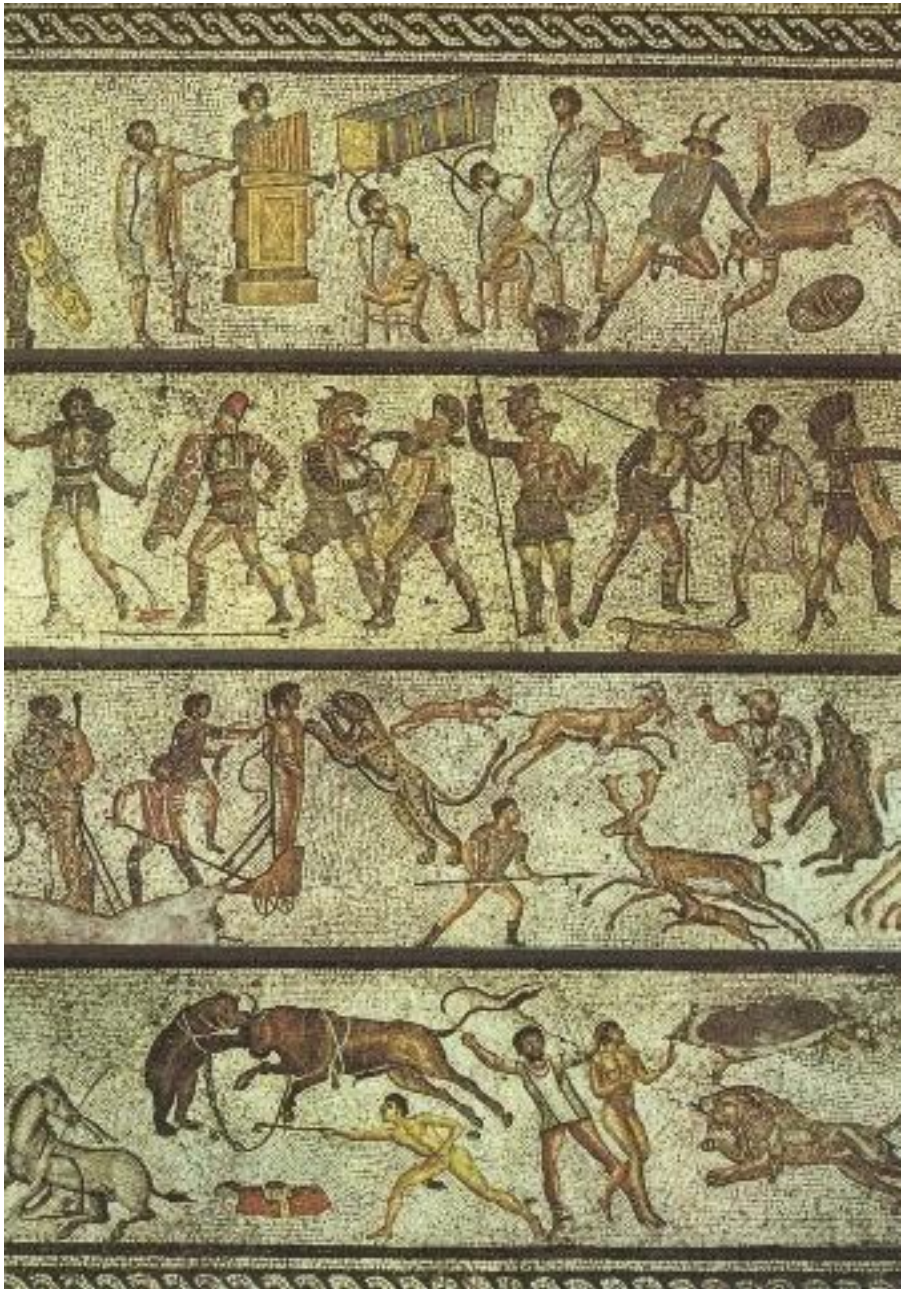


Fig. 16. Entertainment games, mosaic. Jamahiriya Museum, Tripoli.

What were gladiators called? New gladiators could keep their real names or choose either a "stage name" or a battle one. The inscriptions found in many parts of the Roman Empire revealed the most common

names: names of heroes related to myths; names whose mere pronunciation summoned strength, tenacity, and courage, such as *Ferox*, *Victorinus*, or *Triumphus*; animal names (not cowardly animals!), such as *Tigris*, *Leo*, or *Serpentius*; or names of unforgotten champions of the past.

Training and types of gladiators

One day fear knocked at the door. Courage went to open and found no one.

(M.L. King)

The training of a novice who had just entered a *ludus* began under the watchful eye of a coach, usually a former gladiator who had decided to remain connected to the school. During training, one had to fight with blunt wooden weapons and learn the rudiments of an art that could save his life. At the beginning of his career, every novice chose the most congenial weapon for him and consequently also the type of training he should focus on. In reality, this choice was often dictated by the needs of the *lanista* and the specialties of other available gladiators. Leaner and more agile men would normally specialize in combat techniques based on good reflexes and speed; those with a more massive and muscular body would focus on the use of physical force and were considered more suitable to handle heavy armaments. At his onset, the gladiator had to face his first test in front of an audience: if it was okay, he could claim the title of *veteranus* and receive a tablet made of ivory, a sort of ID of the gladiator, with his name, that of his *lanista*, and the date of the first victory. Every subsequent victory was transcribed on this tablet. The higher his number of victories, the more a gladiator was feared. It is also for this reason that his track record was announced in the arena and reported on posters around town. What did the gladiators eat? Doctors always advised a rich and nutritious diet, similar to athletes today. A good *lanista* always made sure that his gladiators ate hearty food, since this was the easiest way to victory. Alimentation was of primary importance, since the gladiators completely relied on their body and muscles. For this reason, on average, a gladiator was likely to eat better and healthier food than the majority of the Roman population. Their diet was based on a mix of barley and beans, a soup called *sagina*. Barley had a key role in their diet and this is why gladiators were often called *hordearii*, or barley eaters. The night before a duel, the gladiator could enjoy what could have been his last dinner: a

hearty meal consumed with all his admirers and supporters.

As noted previously, gladiators were not all the same. They were separated into very specific categories, which made them easy for the audience to recognize. Initially, as mentioned previously, Romans used war prisoners, who, coming from distant regions, were made to fight for propaganda purposes. These categories, the Thracians, the Sunnis, the Germans, the Gauls, and others, changed over the years and some categories disappeared altogether. At the time of Augustus, an official classification of the various categories of gladiators started to appear. Armor started to be used for clearer differentiation and gladiators began to be classified on the basis of their combat techniques and weapons used. However, there were common elements to all classes of gladiators, for example, they fought bare-chested, without any kind of armor, so that any shots might be fatal; almost everyone wore a large thong attached to the waist with a belt; bands of leather were worn to protect their legs and metal leggings were tied to their calves. Many gladiators protected one arm, usually the right one, which was most exposed to blows, with a woolen jacket and metal plates that expanded from hand to the shoulder. These were elements common to all gladiators, but there were then differences related to the type of weapon used and fighting technique. The *Sunnis* were one of the oldest groups of fighters. Heavily armed according to their Italic tradition, they were one of the first great enemies of Rome. They wore a long shield; a helmet with visor; and a short sword, the *gladius* (Fig. 17), which later gave the name to the entire class of fighters. The Sunnis disappeared during the age of Augustus.



Fig. 17. A dagger (gladius).

The *Gauls* were another traditional enemy of Rome. They wore big shields, a helmet, and a long double-edged sword. They disappeared during the late Republican age.

The *Thrax* appeared for the first time in the first century B.C., when some Thracian soldiers were captured during service to their king. This was one of the most popular categories, characterized by a helmet topped with a griffin. The Thracians carried a small shield with their left hand and wielded a curved dagger with their right. They were considered among the best fighters. The *Retiarius*, or the net carrier, distinguished himself from his colleagues by carrying a net to trap his opponents and then finish them off with a stab. He was the only of the groups who dueled bareheaded.

The *Secutores*, *Contraretiarii*, and *Provocatores* rather than being real categories were differentiated by different fighting techniques, but often with similar weapons. The *Mirmilloni*, who developed from the Gauls, were recognizable by a *myrma*, which was a fish depicted on their helmet. Their weapons were a large rectangular shield, a helmet with crest, and a long sword. The *Oplomaco* fought with a large shield, *hoplon*; an imposing helmet, their faces protected with a ridge; and a sword as a weapon of offense. The *Essedari* fought on wagons, exactly as the Britons did. In fact, this category of fighters appeared from the age of Claudius (41–54 A.D.), or at the time of war campaigns that

resulted in Rome conquering Britain.

The *Equites*, knights, were not easily identifiable because they were rarely represented. However, we know that they fought against other knights and clearly had military origins.

A separate category was represented by the left-handed. The use of left-handed gladiators was highly sought after by the *lanista* and much appreciated by the public because of the greater spectacle of their fights. The use of the left hand, in many cases, could disorient their opponents and make the fights more exciting.

Tunicates are the last worth mentioning. Unlike the other groups, they wore a tunic that reached just below the knee. Romans did not like them and considered them despicable and effeminate, but they were accepted into the gladiatorial schools despite their diversity.

How did gladiators really fight?

Hope isn't the last to die, dying is.

(L. Sciascia)

The programs of the games were announced by "posters" painted on the walls of the city. They reported the location of the show; the name of the organizer of the games; the reason for their organization (e.g., a special event, the good health of the emperor, or a celebration for a particular patrician); how many gladiators would fight; if there were also hunting performances, executions, fights between animals and humans; and whether perfumes would be used. Why were scented sprays used (like very popular saffron-based ones)? These were ideal to mask the smell of blood and death resulting from the shows. The posters also specified the possibility of deploying wooden balls (described previously) and the presence or absence of the *velarium*. On the arena, the beginning of the games was always introduced by an opening parade followed by a group of gladiators elegantly dressed for the occasion. The famous phrase pronounced by gladiators before the games, "*Ave Caesar morituri te salutant*" (hello Caesar, those who are about to die salute you), was actually never used, except for on one specific occasion: during a grand naval battle held in Lake Fucino in Abruzzo in 52 A.D. under the reign of Claudius. That was the only time the phrase was used and it never became part of the tradition of gladiators. In the opening parade, all members of the orchestra played straight and curved trumpets, flutes, and horns. There were also referees wearing wide-sleeved tunics decorated with vertical red stripes and holding a long wand. The referees played a key role and

had to have precise knowledge of the rules and techniques of combat. In most cases, not by coincidence, they were former gladiators. The procession stopped in the middle of the arena and the gladiators, after removing their helmets, probably made themselves recognizable to the public. Everybody then went back to the basement, with the exception of the gladiators and referees, who stayed to stretch their muscles with harmless wooden weapons. Once the warm-up was finished, the gladiators also went back to the basement while weapons were examined to check that everything was in order and whether the weapons needed sharpening. Afterwards, the core part of the show started. All sorts of personalities functional to the clashes walked into the arena: gladiators took their places in pairs in different parts of the arena to ensure good visibility to the whole public; musicians emphasized the most dramatic moments of the fighting (a kind of soundtrack to the events); attendants held signs with information for the public; and other attendants were ready to prod gladiators who were cowardly or exhausted with red-hot iron bars. At the sides of the stage, there were attendants who had the humble task of cleaning up the arena of corpses and blood. Duels probably took place within areas marked with chalk to prevent the two contenders from escaping freely throughout the arena. A deafening roar from the public, which resounded throughout the amphitheater, accompanied the start of the fights. The clash ended when one (or both) of the gladiators died or when one of them, exhausted, surrendered. A gladiator could surrender in many ways, but the message that he could not fight anymore had to be very clear. Raising the left hand was one of the possible ways of doing so because it was used to hold the shield for defense. Raising the left hand indicated clearly their will to refrain from defending themselves. However, it was also possible that both gladiators, tired after a long battle, failed to go on: in that case, the referee gave them a break. If after resumption of the fight there was still no winner, the referee stopped the fight once more and asked for the judgment of the organizer of the games and the public. The pairs of gladiators who had fought with courage were often allowed to leave the arena triumphantly and the match ended in a draw. The majority of combats ended with victory for one of the fighters: one could be exhausted by fatigue or serious injury and not be able to fight at full strength or stumble, lose his balance, and be killed. The chances that a fight would end in a draw were low. When one of the gladiators surrendered, everyone turned to the organizer of the games or emperor to await the verdict. This was the time when the gladiator

hoped to receive grace and is one of the most represented moments of gladiatorial life in Roman art. It was a moment filled with pathos when everything seemed to be suspended. After all, the verdict depended on the whims of the public and the emperor was always trying to satisfy them. When the audience was divided, however, the emperor had to decide on the basis of the costs of the gladiators. The one whose price of engagement was very high had more chance of being saved because of the obligation to compensate the *lanista* for his full price upon his death. Few know that starting from the third century A.D., the decision on the fate of a gladiator was the responsibility of the winner. One myth to dispel is about grace being denied with the famous gesture of thumbs down. However, in reality, Romans probably indicated the denial of grace by placing their thumbs horizontally to symbolize a sword cutting the throat of the defeated gladiator. In this case, the gladiator bowed and waited for the blow to the nape or throat. Normally, those who had to die did not remove the helmet (*Fig. 18*), so that the opponent was not forced to see their last look. This habit was a consequence of the fact that many gladiators trained together and some of them were certainly friends: imagine if one fine day you had to fight a friend or, even worse, kill him...



Fig. 18. Helmet of a gladiator.

Gladiators could have their life saved, but there were also games called *munera sine missione*, where one of the two contenders was bound to die. We know that Augustus forbade this kind of game, but they came into practice again a few years later with Caligula and were very popular, especially in the late antiquity.

What was the real mortality level during duels? How many had the chance to get out alive from a fight? Contrary to popular belief, the probability of exiting from the arena alive, at least in the Republican era and in the first imperial age, was not low. There were more risks of dying from deep wounds or cowardice (which could enrage the audience, who would consequently ask for the gladiator to be killed) than by being denied grace. In late imperial times instead, exactly the opposite was true, and forgiveness became an exception. In these cases, at the end of the contest, the winner approached the imperial stage to receive the award, often consisting of a sum of money and a laurel wreath. Bowed before the emperor, the gladiators greeted the crowd with a lap of honor and then exited the arena from the *Porta Triumphalis*. The price of engagement for a gladiator winning a game

increased and he could enjoy several months of rest before being called to action again. Dead gladiators were placed onto stretchers or litters, carried away through the *Porta Libitina*, and conducted to the *spoliarium* to wait for someone (for example, family members) to claim the body. If no one came forward, they received a paltry burial in a mass grave and their *collegium* could arrange a decent funeral. It was also possible, however, that the same gladiatorial *familia* would finance the funeral of a colleague.

Myths surrounding the gladiators

Not to have lived would be better than living with no glory.

(Napoleon)

The gladiators and their fights were so popular that we still have much iconographic evidence of them. The reality of the games thrilled the Romans as much as soccer does in our modern society. The gladiators and their adventures were depicted in mosaics, paintings, graffiti, public and private buildings, funeral reliefs, and so on. Many daily objects (i.e., lamps or vases) were decorated with scenes of battles and their protagonists. The Roman world was completely permeated by the adrenaline-soaked atmosphere of the gladiatorial games. Once again, our main source of information is from Pompeii. In the barracks of the gladiators of this provincial town, along with materials, weapons, helmets, and richly decorated graves, the skeleton of a woman was found together with those of men. An interesting discovery... what was a woman wearing lots of jewelry doing in a school of gladiators? Was she perhaps the lover of one of them, a prostitute, or a rich lady who was surprised by the eruption and was seeking shelter? We will never know, but she could very well have gone there to meet one of the gladiators. This skeleton could be further evidence of something that archeologists know very well: the fascination women had for gladiators. They were considered a model of masculinity not only for their prowess and strength, but also because their dice with death, which struck the imagination of the Romans. In those days, it was not uncommon to read words of love on the walls of the barracks. The gladiators knew young women were attracted to them and often met them, even far away from the gladiatorial school. Those love stories sometimes ended quickly, but others lasted longer and it was not uncommon to see women wearing clips to hold clothes in the form of a spear or sword and stained with the blood of a dead gladiator. Attraction to these men came from all

social classes, from young plebeians to the wives of senators. Sometimes the passion was stronger than the natural repulsion of a Roman towards a gladiator, who was generally considered to be infamous, an outsider, and indecent. A gladiator was a villain because he had given up the inviolability of his body and performed in an indecent way in public, endangering his life and killing if necessary; nevertheless, he was loved and revered. Prostitutes had a similar fate in the Roman world: they were condemned by Roman morality, but their services were always in demand.

Betting was also well known in the time of the Romans. A world of unscrupulous people, who made money by gambling on the outcome of duels, surrounded the gladiators. Gladiators also influenced the superstitions of the Romans. It was thought that the blood of gladiators had magical properties and, if an epileptic ingested it, he could be healed. A young unmarried woman who received a weapon that had killed a gladiator had higher chances of finding a husband soon. The blood of gladiators was also considered to be a powerful aphrodisiac. This can probably all be explained by the relationship gladiators had with death and with the contempt of a system of rules of which love for one's own life was an essential part. This reversal of values led to the birth of morbid passions from the public, which generated an unbridled feeling that was stronger than the social disapproval surrounding the gladiators; this contempt never affected the popularity of the games. The erotic appeal that the figures of the gladiators exerted on women was part of this context of attraction and repulsion; a dynamic that went beyond the strict Roman social division of class or wealth. Few openly criticized the games in the amphitheater, but the Roman mentality changed over time. The rise of Christianity, increasing difficulties in finding people and animals for the games, and the economic crisis were the deciding factors that led to the end of gladiatorial combats. A very interesting aspect is what early Christians thought about the games: they did not feel compassion for the gladiators killing each other. They thought instead that it was the public who suffered most damage from attending the games. Observing fights made people as impure as the protagonists of the games; this thought was surprisingly close to that of the pagan writers. Only later did Christians begin to feel compassion for those performing in the arena who risked their own lives.

With the edict of Berito in 325 A.D., Constantine commuted the death sentence of fighting in the arena (*damnatio ad gladium*) for

forced labor in the mines (*damnatio ad metalla*). This was the first step, at least on paper, towards the end of the games; however, the habit took a long time to disappear. Another century passed before the duels between gladiators were completely abolished and with them the story (for better or worse) of these extraordinary characters of Roman history.

4. *Myths of the Colosseum*

Where has the Colosseum gone?

In Rome there are vestiges of a splendor and such a debacle that go beyond, the one and the other, our imagination.

(J. W. Goethe)

For centuries, the Colosseum has provided construction material for popes, cardinals, and nobles. Current rules to preserve ancient monuments did not exist at that time and monuments could be plundered for marble, stones, bricks, or iron. The architectural history of Rome can be seen as a continuous recycling of materials that were used for various purposes, but primarily to build splendid monuments around the city. On one hand, we might think that, if nothing had been touched, perhaps we could still admire many of the monuments that were lost with time. On the other hand, if it was not possible to recycle material, today we would not be able to admire those masterpieces built thanks to the destruction of ancient ones. Why were Roman buildings used as quarries? Mostly, this was one way to save money. The popes, cardinals, or nobles who wanted to build their houses or churches could take the materials directly from the city without buying them elsewhere. Second, this option was also attractive because the materials used by the Romans were, in many cases, of fine quality, which was an important aspect for those who wished to reuse them.

Contrary to what one might think, the first to start stripping materials from monuments to reuse them in the late antiquity were the Romans. An example of this is the Arch of Constantine, located near the Colosseum, which was built mostly with reused materials. Even the Colosseum, before the fall of the Roman Empire, was plundered by the Romans. Recycling materials became so popular over the centuries that many people opened up their own workshops (*calcinare*) close to the monuments or in the main areas from where the materials could be taken. Over the centuries, in these workshops statues, cornices, columns, capitals, arches, reliefs, sarcophagi, and much more were reused, in particular, for the benefit of the Church. In this way, the Church not only saved on materials and on the purchase of lime, but also contributed to the destruction of any reminders of paganism. The fierce race for the reutilization of marble and stones was at its utmost with Humanism when the ancient world

was rediscovered through its literature, wisdom, myths, and art. With the so-called revival of the arts (Renaissance, 15th and 16th centuries), the destruction of the monuments was even more intense, and the frenzy of breaking them down knew no boundaries. In this period, ancient Rome really began to disappear. Until then, a good part of the monuments, although damaged, were still standing, but the uncontrolled depredation of that time reduced them to the state in which we see them today, although strangely enough this was exactly the historical period that claimed the importance of antiquity. Among the buildings destroyed at that time, was also the Colosseum, which, after it was transformed into an immense quarry, provided tons and tons of materials. Let us explore in detail what they were used for:

The Palazzo Venezia: defined as "the first great work of Renaissance civil architecture in Rome", it was started in 1455 by Pietro Barbo, who was the future Pope Paul II, as his residence (*Fig. 19*). Enlarged and embellished in later years, it was given its current name in 1564 when a part was given to the Republic of Venice to make it the seat of its ambassador. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, it was sold first to France and later to Austria. In 1916, the Italian state confiscated it and turned it into a museum and cultural institution. From 1929 to 1943, it housed the offices of Mussolini and the Fascist Grand Council. From its balcony, Mussolini harangued crowds in the square below, and from that same balcony on June 10th, 1940, he declared war on the UK and France. For Italy, it was the beginning of World War II.

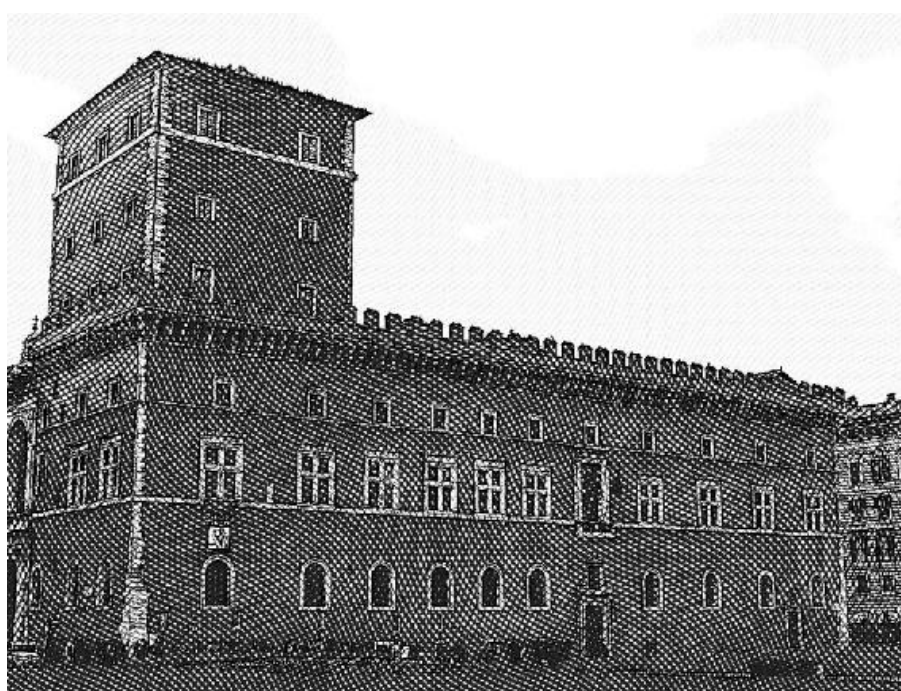


Fig. 19. The Palazzo Venezia.

The Basilica of San Marco: founded in 336 A.D. by the only Pope called Marco to date and dedicated to Mark the evangelist (*Fig. 20*). It was restored several times over the centuries and completely renovated in the mid-15th century by Pope Paul II at the same time as he built the palace of Venice. The facade was built entirely with marble taken from the Colosseum and the Theater of Marcellus.



Fig. 20. Basilica of San Marco.

The Palazzo Farnese: the largest Renaissance palace and the last to be built during the extraordinary architectural adventure of that time initiated with the Palazzo Venezia. Its construction began in 1517 for Cardinal Alessandro Farnese (then future Pope Paul III) and top names such as Michelangelo, Vignola, Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, and Giacomo Della Porta contributed to its edification. The palace (*Fig. 19*), now the headquarters of the French Embassy, presents an extraordinary cornice proportionate to the entire building. It is inserted in a quiet square where two fountains from the ancient Baths of Caracalla (another example of reuse of ancient artworks) provide a fine display. It is considered to be one of the most beautiful palaces in Rome.



Fig. 21. The Palazzo Farnese.

The Palace of the Chancellery: another masterpiece of the Roman Renaissance. Started in 1485 and finished in 1513, it was confiscated a few years later from the Riario, a noble family that lost it by gambling. After the fall of Rome in 1870 and the birth of the Kingdom of Italy, it remained the seat of Cardinal Chancellor. Today, it enjoys the privilege of extraterritoriality, since it belongs to the Holy See. Even today, it is not clear who may have been the architect to design this splendid Renaissance building. Bramante probably contributed to the realization of the beautiful courtyard (*Fig. 22*).



Fig. 22. The courtyard of the Palace of the Chancery.

The tribune of St. John in the Lateran: the cathedral of Rome was founded in the fourth century on the properties of the ancient Roman family of the Lateran, and donated by emperor Constantine to the Pope. Over the centuries, it underwent several renovations and refurbishments. The current church was restored by Borromini for the Jubilee of 1650. The forum used as a lodge for blessings (*Fig. 23*), which joins the outside of the transept on the right side, was rebuilt in 1439 using travertine from the Colosseum.



Fig. 23. The tribune of St. John in the Lateran

Ripetta port (no longer in existence): after the earthquake of 1703, which brought down many blocks of travertine from the Colosseum, Alessandro Specchi built these docks at the Tiber under Pope Clement XI. He used only blocks that fell from the Colosseum as a result of the quake. At the end of the 1800s, the need to protect Rome from continual flooding of the river led to construction of the walls that we see today and the port, which no longer had any economic justification, was demolished.

Some mistakes in “Gladiator”

“The beating heart of Rome is not the marble of the Senate but the sand of the Colosseum.”

(From “Gladiator”)

In the 1950s and 1960s, many great blockbuster movies on ancient Rome were realized, such as *Spartacus* and *Quo Vadis*: great actors and thousands of extras, great scenery, and a multitude of costumes. After these great movies, until the year 2000, no equivalent masterpiece on the history of ancient Rome was produced. This is when “Gladiator” by Ridley Scott (Fig. 24) was released. The movie, which cost \$103 million, had great international success and is still one of the most popular on the theme of gladiators and games at the Colosseum. However, watching it carefully, you can find some errors in the historical reconstructions.

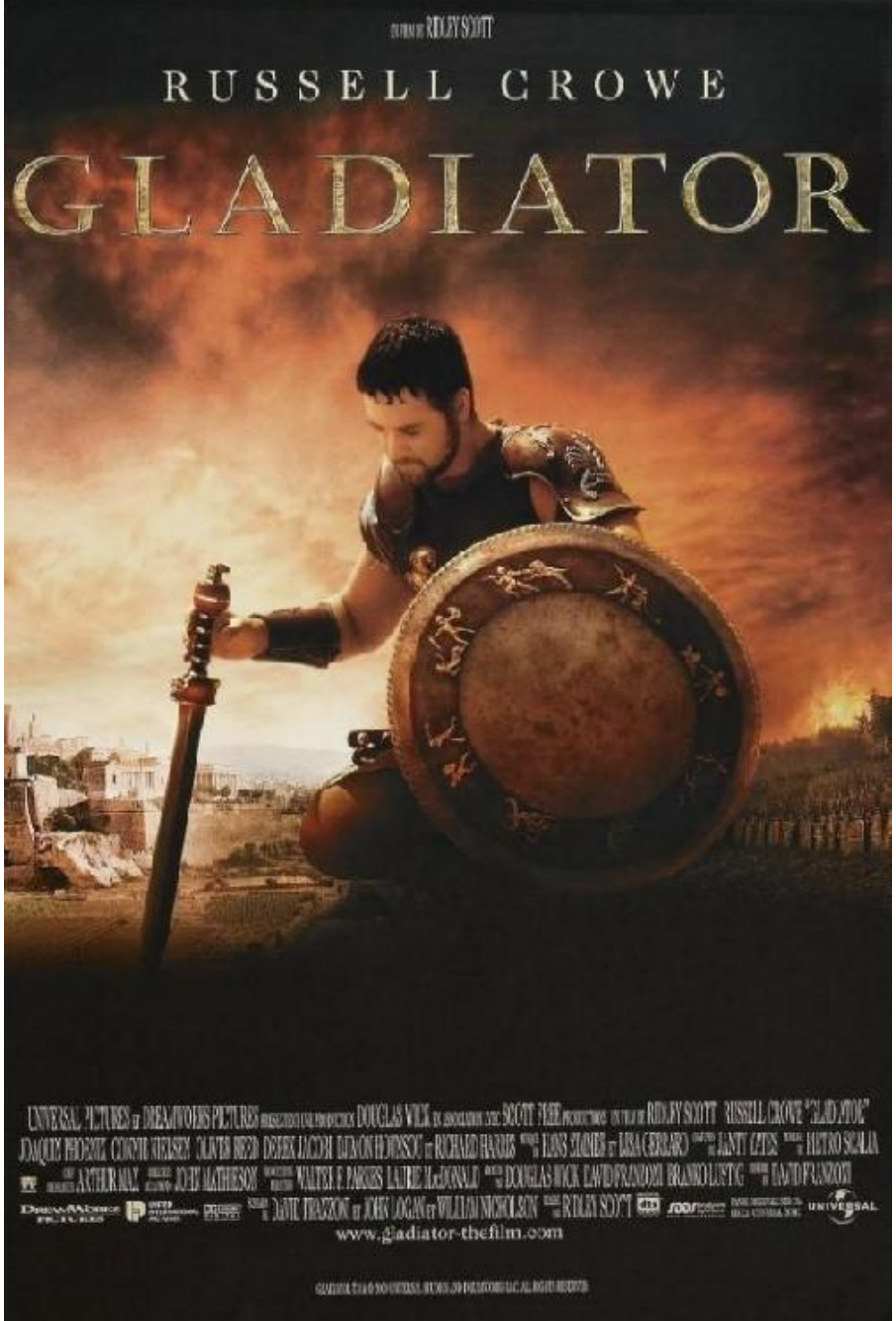


Fig. 24. “Gladiator”.

The story unfolds as follows: in 180 A.D. Emperor Marcus Aurelius decides to relinquish power to the brave general Maximus Decimus Meridio (played by Russell Crowe). Commodus (Joaquin Phoenix), dissolute son of Marcus Aurelius, after becoming aware of his father’s

last wishes regarding succession, kills him and Maximus' family and imprisons the centurion. Sold as a slave in Africa to Proximo, Maximus is forced to perform in spectacular battles in the arenas, showing excellent warrior skills. When Commodus organizes the games in Rome to gain popularity, Proximo brings his gladiators, including Maximus, to the Colosseum. He immediately realizes the opportunity to finally take his revenge. Some historical inaccuracies can already be spotted in the plot. Commodus did not die in the arena of the Colosseum[35] and his father, Marcus Aurelius, was not killed, but died of natural causes. One curiosity: all busts of Commodus show him with a beard, whereas in the movie he is always clean-shaven. Several times during the movie, you can hear the word Colosseum, but, as we know, the term Colosseum only came into use in the Middle Ages, which was several centuries after the fall of the Roman Empire. Another curious detail is that in some scenes you can see a tattoo on the wounded shoulder of Maximus. Romans took extreme care of their body and they did not alter their look by drawing on the skin. Moreover, at that time, tattoos were known only in the region of Thrace, far from Rome. In the movie, Maximus said that his wife and son were crucified while he was away. However, since Maximus and his family were Roman citizens, it is highly unlikely that this could have happened. Roman citizens were almost never crucified because this kind of death was considered to be humiliating and was reserved for non-Roman citizens.

During the movie, a few times we move inside the Colosseum: exciting scenes of fighting and a spectacular reconstruction of the amphitheater are shown. The director emphasizes the confused looks of the gladiators entering the arena and being surrounded by thousands of screaming Romans. This must have been exactly the same feeling that real gladiators had when entering the Flavian amphitheater to fight for the first time. However, here and there, one can observe small mistakes in Latin epigraphic inscriptions[36], and looking at the public one may see women and men sitting in the same rows. This was not possible in Roman times, since women were obliged to sit on the top level. The famous phrase, which, according to tradition, was uttered by the gladiators, "*Ave, Caesar, morituri te salutant*", was used only once during the naval battle of Lake Fucino in Abruzzo in 52 A.D. and no literary source reports it as ever being pronounced by gladiators before their fights. Moreover, in Rome, gladiators never fought wild beasts. That was the duty of the *venatores* or hunters, who also followed a different kind of training. Looking at

the way they fight in the film, one might be doubtful of the following: Maximus seems to move the sword as they used to in the Middle Ages or in oriental disciplines, whereas offensive or defensive movements of the gladiators were much faster.

In general, however, despite inaccuracies, this film is a beautiful movie that leaves one captivated until the end with a beautiful soundtrack that excites as much as, and perhaps even more, than the images.

From a deadly arena to a symbolic monument

Time is an illusion.

(A. Einstein)

From 1928 to 2000, a stylized version of a portion of the external arches of the Colosseum was represented on the gold, silver, and bronze medals distributed to winning athletes in different disciplines at the Olympic games. The modern Olympics are a restatement of ancient ones and of the classical world, and the Colosseum is the most magnificent monument preserved from the classical world. However, this is a tenuous connection and at the Sydney Olympics in 2000 the presence of the Colosseum on medals ignited various discussions. Many people wondered why the effigy of a monument that was the stage of so much death was represented on the medals of a competition traditionally based on the ideals of peace and brotherhood. The criticisms were certainly understandable, but it was not enough to convince the International Olympic Committee to change the medals. Everything remained as it was. However, when the Olympic Games were played in Greece in 2004, the outline of the Colosseum was immediately replaced by a figure of Victory soaring over Panathinaikon stadium in Athens, which was built for the first modern Olympic Games in 1896. The issue was so pressing and delicate that the Greeks even created a special "Committee to change the design of the Olympic medals".

The idea that the Colosseum should not and could not represent an event symbol of peace and brotherhood is understandable. As a consequence, in recent years, since its history is punctuated with so much blood, the Colosseum has been "converted" into ambassador of respect for human life. Whenever a death sentence is suspended somewhere in the world, and every time a country decides to abrogate the death penalty from its penal code, the Colosseum is illuminated with a special light. This is a small tribute to all those states that try to

solve crime-related problems by not committing another crime and a small tribute to those who postpone the execution of a person with the hope that an alternative solution can be found.

An ancient Roman could never imagine what we (the modern people!) would use *his* Colosseum for. What would he say upon seeing a concert held to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the death of Giuseppe Verdi in 1951? His first comment would have surely been: "How can you arrange a concert here? The acoustics are terrible!" He would be right, since that concert was terrible in terms of acoustics. It was much better for the concert of Paul McCartney in 2003, perhaps also thanks to better technology. The atmosphere of that concert must have been priceless... as well as the tickets, since some were sold for €1,000. Fortunately, it was a charity event. The singer repeated the show outside the Colosseum for free and this time not for only a 1,000 people, but for more than 250,000. Our ancient Roman would be amazed to know that over the centuries not only powerful Roman families, popes, nobles, and today's tourists have colonized the Colosseum, but also several hundreds of types of plants that have grown over time between its corners, crevices, cracks, bricks, and stones. The plants, probably due to a favorable microclimate inside the monument, or (less likely) due to seeds brought in on the sandals of travelers, have found their perfect habitat in the amphitheater for many centuries. These plants previously sparked interest equal to that of Colosseum, since visitors were fascinated to see a botanical garden "naturally" placed within an ancient monument. It is curious to note that, by studying the plants that grew (and still grow) inside the Colosseum, it is possible to develop a climate history of the city of Rome in recent centuries. According to some studies, it is possible to trace the growth of plants inside the monument since 1643 and the results are extremely interesting. The diversity of plants not only testifies to the high degree of biodiversity of the flora of Rome, but it is also an excellent indicator of climate changes that have occurred so far. From the disappearance or presence of certain types of plants, researchers have concluded that the climate of Rome (and consequently of central Italy) a few centuries ago was colder and wetter than it is today. Moreover, the fact that the Colosseum hosts some extremely rare plants for the city of Rome confirms that archaeological areas may be a good habitat for plants disappearing from other areas.

The Colosseum was built in a city like Rome with an impressive

number of monuments, but despite this, it has become one of its symbols, if not *the* symbol, of its ancient history. A predominantly touristic symbol that attracts thousands of people daily who defy the heat, crowds, or offers of group photos with fake gladiators to visit this giant of history. Also, thanks to many films, although blamed for what happened on its arena, this amphitheater still plays the role of a monument that, in a perverse game, attracts plenty of tourists. Tourists cannot avoid visiting the Colosseum during their journey in Rome or resist the opportunity to take a few photos within. Today, the conversion of this giant from a deadly arena into a tourist attraction has become providential for its own protection. It is desirable that other initiatives for peace and respect of life, such as the one relating to the death penalty described above, can take inspiration from the memorable arches of the Colosseum.

Conclusion

Antiquity is the aristocracy of history.

(A. Dumas)

Despite the fact that more than 19 centuries have passed since its construction, the Colosseum continues to attract thousands of people every day. These visitors are amazed, intrigued, and fascinated by the care the Romans took in building a monument intended to celebrate death and suffering. Many still wonder today how it was possible that a civilization like the Romans was capable of idolizing death and suffering inside the Colosseum and in many other amphitheaters scattered around the empire. For our modern sensitivity, everything that happened on the arena should (rightly) be condemned, but are we really the ones to judge? An ancient Roman living today would certainly be impressed by the violence seen in movies, video games, on the news, or in the street. If we lived in Roman times, are we sure that we would have lived without the games in the Colosseum? Or would we also have been caught up in the adrenaline, passion, and emotion? Is it possible that all 55,000–60,000 people who packed the Colosseum during each show were perverted? Of course, there were those who were against the shows of gladiators or hunts in the arena, but they were a very small minority. The vast majority of people loved the shows and the Romans invested an incredible amount of money, time, resources, and manpower into building a monument that was apparently only intended for entertainment. To the emperors and ruling class of the time, the Colosseum was a monumental work of

political propaganda and social control. At the end of a fight between gladiators, the emperor had to decide the fate of the defeated gladiator, but he would not immediately decide without gauging the passion of the people. The first thing he did was to sense the mood of the people, look around, and try to understand what the people, his people, were thinking, and on that basis make a decision. It was essential that his decision not be against the will of the people sitting in the arena. An emperor who decided something unpopular was in danger of not being loved and in some cases would even be risking his own life. In the end, what was important was for people to have fun and eat without worries. Juvenal summed all this up in his famous statement, almost an advertising slogan: *panem et circenses*. Bread, or food, and games. This was the best way to distract the people and prevent possible riots. This social control looks surprisingly modern and close to that applied even today in certain parts of the world. The logic of power in the end has not changed and the mechanisms, with obvious differences in their application, are always the same. The Colosseum, an extraordinary monument to imperial propaganda, is a classic example. If one forgets the cruelty of the games and the logic of power, this is a feat of engineering and one of the greatest ever built by mankind. It is no coincidence that still today thousands of people can visit this giant of the Romans. Through the centuries, the Colosseum was mutilated, pillaged, used as a red-light district, as a fortress, as an apartment building, as a refuge for thieves and criminals, as a quarry for materials, and today (more respectfully) for Stations of the Cross and as tourist attraction. It resisted. If its walls, its vaults, or its underground could talk, they would tell interesting (and maybe gruesome) stories of our ancestors. Despite the limited means of many centuries ago, the Romans were able to build an extraordinary monument that is still here, with its history, its secrets, its roars, its moans, its voices, its mute ruins, and its screams lost in time.

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[1] Some sections of this book are inspired by data from two texts that I consider valid: “Morte nell’arena” by Federica Guidi and “Un giorno al Colosseo” by Fik Meijer.

[2] In 6 A.D., to be precise.

[3] He was described this way by Suetonius, “Life of Caesars”, *Nero*, LI.

[4] Not all scholars agree with this interpretation. At present, we do not have any ancient documents that clarify the origin of the word “Colosseum”.

[5] When he was about to die, he tried to stand up from his bed saying, “*Imperatorem stantem mori oportet*” (the Emperor must die standing).

[6] The last of three emperors during the turbulent period of 68–69 A.D.

[7] Among the Imperial Forums, the Peace Forum was the third one to be built and it was inaugurated in 75 A.D. It was dedicated to the Pax Augusta, so-called by the imperial propaganda, which was the peace reported by Vespasian after the difficult period following the death of Nero and the Jewish revolt. It was located roughly between the current Largo Corrado Ricci, Via dei Fori Imperiali, and the Basilica of Saints Cosmas and Damian. Today, only a small section is visible.

[8] Palatine, Esquiline, Caelian, and the Velian hill. The last of these basically no longer exists. It was destroyed by Mussolini for the realization of the actual Via dei Fori Imperiali.

[9] Travertine was called *lapis Tiburtinus*, from the ancient name of Tivoli, *Tibur*, where the quarries were and still are.

[10] This is one of the main differences between Greek and Roman architecture.

[11] The stone (or brick) situated in the most central and highest part of the arch.

[12] Technical name that indicate each stone of the semicircular part of the arch.

[13] The greatest architect of Roman antiquity, favorite of Trajan, was disgraced under his successor Hadrian. He openly criticized the ideas of Hadrian on architecture by telling him bluntly that he did not understand anything. Hadrian, who dabbled in architecture, as well as many other disciplines, was not happy with this and other comments against him and decided to send him into exile and then to have him killed.

[14] It is no coincidence that the first amphitheaters were called *spectacula*, literally “the place from which you look”.

[15] January 2015.

[16] In 2008, excavations near the Colosseum revealed a fragment of an equestrian statue: maybe one of those that decorated the arches of the second and third floors. Today, it is displayed on the ground floor inside the Colosseum.

[17] Like the Arena of Verona, a Roman amphitheater still incorrectly called Arena.

[18] The senators were the only ones to have the privilege of sitting on seats engraved with their names.

[19] More information on the Vestal Virgins are in the chapter dedicated to the public of the Colosseum.

[20] It remained accessible until 508 A.D. and it was partially explored in his stretch to the Celius. However, it is not yet known exactly where it led. Initially, the passage was adorned with walls and floor covered in marble and had a ceiling decorated in stucco. Then the floor was replaced with a black and white mosaic and the walls decorated with frescoes with scenes related to games and the Dionysian world.

[21] Naval battles (*naumachie*) were reproduced in a special huge basin filled with water for the occasion. Not all the scholars agree on the staging of naval battles inside the Colosseum.

[22] Known as west cryptoporticus, it was cut in 1939 for the construction of the metro B line.

[23] The *toga* was a large woolen cloak that the ancient Romans wore over their tunics. This kind of gown could only be worn only by male Roman citizens. The slaves, foreigners, and those sentenced to exile could not wear it.

[24] The average height of an ancient Roman was 165 cm (5'5").

[25] Let's take the case of Messalina, fifth wife of Emperor Claudius (41–54 A.D.). She married, against her will, Claudius, who was about 30 years older than her, stammering, and lame. She had a sexually unrestrained life. Besides having had countless lovers, it seems that at night she would offer her body to sailors and gladiators in brothels under the fictitious name of Licisca.

[26] In Italy, during Christmas time it is customary to play games of chance with family or friends. Betting very small or often symbolic

amounts of money gives an added thrill to games that are only played at that time of year.

[27] The *Forma Urbis* is a map of ancient Rome carved on marble slabs. Made in the early third century A.D. under Septimius Severus, it was made on a scale of 1:240 and reported details of the ground floors of all buildings in Rome at that time. It probably had a cadastral function. Today about one-tenth of the plan has been preserved and it is, despite the small portion left, an essential topographical instrument to provide knowledge of the ancient city.

[28]

Ludus literally means game in Latin. In this case, the "game" in question was gladiatorial.

[29] I will come back later to the possibilities for a gladiator to have a funeral.

[30] The ancient region of Dacia included a territory approximately corresponding to modern-day Romania. This name derives from the Romans who ruled those lands. This is also why the Romanian language is similar to Italian and also derived from Latin. Dacia was conquered by Trajan in the early second century A.D. after some difficult war campaigns, which are beautifully described in the reliefs of Trajan's Column.

[31] Gaul was a region of Western Europe encompassing modern day France, Belgium, Luxembourg, parts of Switzerland, parts of northern Italy as well as parts of the Netherlands and Germany.

[32] The Western Roman Empire formally ceased to exist in 476 A.D.

[33] The name of the dagger, *gladius*, gave its name to the whole category of fighters, *gladiators*.

[34] The same punishment was also reserved for fugitive slaves.

[35] As a matter of fact, Commodus was killed in a conspiracy.

[36] For example, *Ludus magnus gladiatores* should have been *Ludus magnus gladiatorum*.